

battle of ideas

Monthly supplement to Red Weekly

No. 3 December 1976



PROLETARIAN REVOLUTION & BOURGEOIS DEMOCRACY

a reply to Geoff Roberts in 'Marxism Today'

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Introduction

In February 1976 the theoretical journal of the Communist Party of Great Britain, *Marxism Today*, carried an article by Geoff Roberts entitled 'The Politics of the International Marxist Group — Aspects of a Critique'. In striking contrast to previous attempts to criticise Trotskyist politics coming from this quarter, the article avoided traditional Stalinist slanders and instead sought to address itself to a serious critique of the political line of the Fourth International and its British section in the recent period. On this basis Roberts develops a critique of the theoretical tradition of Trotskyism, which he sees as necessarily producing the deviations he has supposedly identified in the IMG and FI.

The fundamentally orthodox CPGB standpoint of the author is indicated by Roberts' profession of loyalty to 'the broad contours of policy outlined in *The British Road to Socialism*...' and his 'basically (though not exclusively) positive assessment of the role of the world communist movement...' (p46). However, Roberts seeks to bolster up the positions of *The British Road to Socialism* with an attempt to appropriate the political legacy of Antonio Gramsci. His article thus has the added interest of presenting currently fashionable theses of 'Euro-Communism' on the nature of the revolution in the West, in the form of a critique of Trotskyism.

As we will show, Roberts' attack on the Trotskyist theoretical tradition involves an absurd caricature and falsification, while his interpretation of Gramsci and notions on the road to socialism in the advanced capitalist countries denies the real problems of Marxist strategy in a bourgeois democracy. We will also consider his more specific critique of the perspectives of the IMG and FI in the last few years.



GRAMSCI



'Marxism Today'



TROTSKY

The Crisis of British Capitalism since 1968

IN ROBERTS' VIEW the IMG and FI were possessed in the early seventies of a grotesquely exaggerated conception of the crisis of capitalism which led them to adopt a series of ultra-leftist and subjectivist political positions. The Fourth International's theses on revolutionary perspectives in Europe and Britain published in *International*, Vol 2, Nos 1 & 2) are cited by Roberts as the source of these errors. These documents argued that the post-war boom was ending and that a generalised recession throughout the capitalist world was imminent. Roberts quotes two summary statements from these documents: 'The socialist revolution is once again on the agenda in Europe, not just in broad historical perspective... but even from a conjunctural point of view'; and in Britain, 'a head-on collision between capital and labour seems unavoidable in the period before us'.

Both of these perspectives insisted that in the coming period the birth of a new proletarian power capable of confronting the bourgeois state would be placed on the agenda after the long quiescence of the period since 1948. In Britain the first steps on the path to such a development lay through unifying and generalising all current struggles in the direction of a General Strike to bring down the Tory government.

Roberts argues that the perspective of a 'growing economic crisis is commonly accepted on the left'. It is all very well to write this in 1976 when there is virtual unanimity on the depth of this crisis, not merely within the left, but in society as a whole. But in 1972 and 1973 when the USFI theses were first presented this was not at all the case. Moreover these theses argued that the approaching generalised recession would involve many novel elements compared with past capitalist crises, in terms of social expendi-

ture, continual inflation, an incapacity to meet the new needs generated during the period of the post-war boom, etc).

The economic perspective of the decisions of the Fourth International were guided in these perspectives by the analysis of Ernest Mandel's *Late Capitalism* (the first edition of which was published in Germany in 1972). Although the particular theses in this work by no means command unanimous assent among Trotskyists, the scope of its analysis of the post-war boom, and its inherent limits, furnished the FI with a prescient and penetrating account of the nature of the coming economic crisis. Despite the fact that there are many talented economists inside the European Communist Parties, during the late sixties and early seventies they did not provide any critical or coherent Marxist perspective on the future of the capitalist economies. [1]

Looking back to the period 1972-76, was the FI wrong to declare that revolutionaries must prepare for a profound crisis of the bourgeois political order; a new upsurge of workers' struggles and the radicalisation of a new workers' vanguard? In different ways, the events in Spain, Portugal and Italy have amply borne out the perspective laid down in the theses of the USFI. In Portugal and Spain struggles against capitalist power have thrown up embryonic workers councils and other popular institutions which potentially embody a fundamental threat to bourgeois rule.

In the Portuguese Presidential elections a candidate, Otelo de Carvalho, standing for the suppression of capitalism and the consolidation of organs of workers power won 17 per cent of the popular vote — well ahead of the candidate of the established Communist Party. In France and Italy there is every prospect that electoral advance will carry the major workers parties into the Government, with far-reaching consequences for the extra-parliamentary mobilisation of both the bourgeoisie and working class. Finally in Britain the events of 1972-74 surely bore out the prognosis that

there would be a 'head-on collision between capital and labour'. After the event it is, of course, possible to make a much richer and more specific analysis of the fundamental social and political forces engaged in this period, though curiously, Roberts makes no attempt to do this.

The momentous struggles against Heath led to widespread acceptance of important new methods of struggle (e.g. factory occupations, flying mass pickets) and culminated in an unprecedented eruption of extra-parliamentary proletarian action within the electoral procedures of the bourgeois political order. The fact that the miners decided to remain on strike after Heath called an election was probably decisive in securing an electoral victory for the Labour Party and in undermining the traditional electoral base of the Conservative Party. The watchword that all current workers struggles should be unified and extended into a general strike to bring down the Government was, therefore, perfectly correct and thoroughly vindicated by subsequent developments.

But in our view the leadership of the IMG at this time did not correctly interpret the USFI theses. It was overwhelmingly likely that Heath would in the circumstances call an election. The failure of the IMG at this time was that of substituting left propagandist phrase-mongering for a clear orientation to the General Election. In the view of the authors of this article, who formed an opposition within the IMG leadership at the time and later formed an organised opposition in the membership, before the election the IMG should have advocated an independent campaign for Labour and for an Action Programme to meet the capitalist crisis. [2]

At some points in the dramatic clashes between Heath and the labour movement the IMG implied that there was an immediate prospect of developing institutions of dual power; Roberts quotes the special issue of *Red Weekly* produced in the immediate aftermath of the February 1974 General Election when Heath tried to form a new government. The *Red*



Action by the miners brought down the Heath government in 1974.

Weekly during this period was responsible for a serious mis-reading of events, stemming from a failure to grasp the fundamental characteristics of a class struggle within a bourgeois democracy. An intoxicated and ultra-left vision of escalating proletarian mobilisation unimpeded by the institutions and forms of bourgeois power was in our opinion evident in some of the IMG's agitation and propaganda. [3]

But we would point out that the opposition which developed within the IMG supported the USFI theses which Roberts identifies as the source of the IMG's ultra-leftism. In fact we considered that these errors were departures from the perspectives which had been developed in these documents.

If we however turn from these particular errors to the CPGB we find that despite Roberts' incantatory evocation of the 'Leninist concept' of the 'present moment' the press of the CPGB was almost barren throughout this period of any attempt to analyse the original and specific conjuncture of these years. While during the period 1972-73 the IMG repeatedly discussed the specific features of the Heath government and the great opportunities that the struggle against it provided for revolutionaries, *Marxism Today* published little that could be described even as an attempt to analyse the current conjuncture.

Sam Aaronovitch published an article entitled 'Perspectives for Class Struggle and Alliances' but the

promise of this title was betrayed by a highly generic discussion of the tasks ahead; after expressing indignation that the Tories were abdicating British 'national sovereignty', Aaronovitch meandered to a conclusion that before 'socialist revolution' became 'an immediate agitational issue' there would be a 'prolonged and complicated process'. The reader was left unenlightened as to the exact nature of this prolonged and complex process.

Another article that promised a specific analysis of the national conjuncture was Mike Costello's 'Opportunities in the Present Situation' published in *Marxism Today* in August 1973. The essence of Costello's argument was that the class struggle in Britain was rapidly sharpening:

'In such circumstances of sharpened class struggle, there can be no doubt that open recourse to fascist methods of rule will be attempted by the ruling class, and that the movement will also throw up disruptive ultra-left bodies such as those which help to sabotage the unity necessary for social transformation today as in Chile or France.'

The hopeless confusion and perilous error that Costello manages to pack into a single sentence, far wilder than even the most ill-considered statements Roberts assiduously seeks out in *Red Weekly* is unfortunately typical of Costello's offering, and constitutes almost the sum total of what could be learnt about the 'current moment' from the pages of *Marxism Today*. A debate on the party's programme

was conducted in terms which would apply to any advanced capitalist country and was silent on the specific features of the prospects for British capitalism.

The more popular productions of the CPGB managed to avoid Costello's hysteria only to replace it with tepid anti-Tory cant and homilies on the need for a Labour Government committed to left policies. Yet during this period militants of the CPGB were well-placed to give a new political dimension to the struggle against the Heath government. The LCDTU, which was organised and led by these militants, played a major role in the mobilisations against Heath and had the potential of becoming a permanent focus for the most advanced militants, co-ordinating and politicising the trade union struggle. If it had held regular, democratically-organised conferences, it would have begun to develop as an independent pole of working class politics: given the passivity of the Labour Party during this period there was a burning need for such a focus for those involved in the struggles that were destroying the government.

Instead the LCDTU confined itself to perfunctory one-day rallies, heavily controlled by the platform and excluding democratic discussion of different conceptions of the way forward. LCDTU supporters were not encouraged to develop a programme of activity on a local basis. Had the LCDTU developed in the ways indicated, not only would it have been able to furnish more effective support to the miners (and the

Shrewsbury Two) in the period before February 1974, but it would also have constituted a formidable obstacle to the subsequent actions of the Labour Government.

The failure of the CPGB during this period was determined by a number of considerations: it did not want to alienate Jack Jones and other left trade union leaders; it feared that such an initiative would escape its control; and it feared the reaction to any open Communist political initiative.

[1] Of course this conclusion is reached not simply by analysing the new economic crisis into which capitalism is plunged, but through identifying the strictly political disarray of the bourgeois order — such as the difficulties of establishing successor regimes in Spain, Portugal and Greece; the historic failure to achieve national integration within the British and Spanish states; the unprecedented test to bourgeois political institutions in France and Italy that will be posed by governments based on workers parties etc.

[2] When resources permit, a selection of discussion bulletins produced in the IMG on these points will be published.

[3] Roberts could have quoted, but does not, the conclusion of the *Red Weekly's* broadsheet which declared that it would 'soon be necessary not only to drive the Tories from office but to smash all the institutions through which the ruling class exercise their power'. This statement seemed to dispense even with the preliminary of institutions of dual power.

Gramsci against Trotsky?

THE GENERAL THEORETICAL issues raised by Roberts supply the kernel of his critique of the FI and the IMG. When Roberts writes that the IMG failed to understand the 'present moment' or to identify the specific features of the national conjuncture in Britain his argument rests not on any considerations peculiar to the British conjuncture — in which he is remarkably uninterested — but on certain supposed features of all advanced capitalist countries.

The 'national road' he proposes for the British working class is virtually identical to the 'national road' proposed for the French or Italian working class. The crucial reference point for Roberts is the work of Gramsci, which functions as a talisman for warding off the supposedly 'ultra-left' spirit of Trotskyism, and for legitimating Roberts' own views concerning the primacy of ideological structures within the power system of bourgeois society.

The resulting confection is offered as justification for the politics of *The British Road to Socialism* — a justification which, we may note in passing, is unlikely to have occurred to the original authors of the *British Road* who displayed no eagerness even to permit Gramsci to be published let alone supply him with a culturalist gloss.

There are certainly major differences of both method and conclusion in the work of Trotsky and Gramsci. However these differences cannot be established without a careful attempt to discover the real argument and position of these two outstanding Marxist thinkers and leaders. For different reasons the work of both Gramsci and Trotsky cannot be simply evaluated and counter-posed on the basis of a few quotations and summary judgements that assume that the respective contribution that they have made to today's Marxist analysis and revolutionary struggles exist ready-made in their writings.

Even setting aside the historical gulf that separates us from them, we face critical problems in interpreting their work; in the case of Gramsci because his



The Russian Revolution - part of the World Revolution, or merely the product of Russia's internal evolution?

writings, especially the *Prison Notebooks* from which Roberts quotes, are notoriously dense and cryptic; in the case of Trotsky the prolonged vilification which has obscured his political thought and action make the necessary balanced and scrupulous interpretation of his work more than normally difficult — for obvious reasons, the theoretical journal of the CPGB is one of the last places where an 'innocent' reading of Trotsky should be attempted. Armed with these warnings let us now get down to cases.

Roberts apparently neatly counterposes Gramsci's attention to the specific features of the social formation in the advanced countries of Western Europe to Trotsky's supposed reduction of all national politics to the dictates of the world economy. Theoretical 'economism' in Trotsky, we are told, leads to political voluntarism (p.51) Trotsky supposedly espoused the 'war of manoeuvre', and the strategy of 'frontal attack' on bourgeois state power. This is allegedly established on the authority of Gramsci and then illustrated by a few sentences from Trotsky's writings.

According to Roberts the basic formula of Trotsky's transitional programme can be reduced to an abstract and mechanistic schema: 'system in crisis, party must present socialist solution, masses will be

forced to adopt these solutions by the objective logic of the crisis, dual power, revolution.' By contrast, we are told, Gramsci understood that in Western capitalist societies the state is only the 'outer ditch' of bourgeois power and the real basis of this power is the ideological 'hegemony' of the bourgeoisie. The task of 'the working class led by its party' is to engage in a 'war of position' and to establish a rival proletarian hegemony before it can 'seize power'.

Roberts suggests that *The British Road to Socialism* lays out the path to proletarian hegemony and, after necessary delays, to proletarian power, because in Gramscian fashion it takes account of the specificity of British traditions, culture institutions, etc.

It must be said that Roberts displays no care, or even interest, in establishing Gramsci's real argument concerning the 'war of position', the state as an 'outer ditch', the 'starting point' of internationalism, etc. There is little excuse for this since the editors of the excellent English edition of the *Prison Notebooks*, from which Roberts quotes, explicitly warn the reader of at least some of the problems involved (see the 'Introduction', pp206-9 and specifically footnote 35, p. 236).

Thus, for example, Trotsky was the leading opponent of the 'war of manoeuvre' and the 'strategy of the offensive' in both the military and political debates of the early twenties to which Gramsci is referring in the passages quoted by Roberts. The theses on the United Front which Gramsci is endorsing were, in fact, presented at the Comintern Congress by Trotsky, (as Gramsci elsewhere indicates, p. 236) in opposition to most of the Italian Communists who sponsored the 'theory of the offensive' in the political sphere.

Given the dates on these texts (they are all written in the early thirties) and the circumstance that Gramsci's notes were being smuggled out of Italy by friends in the Soviet Embassy, it is quite likely that the real target of Gramsci's strictures was Stalin's Third Period policy. These notes are in any case often inconsistent and obscure even though at the same time they may be suggestive and brilliant. Thus sometimes it is the state which is the outer ditch, in other passages it is the superstructural institutions which constitute the 'trenches' while the repressive apparatus is the inner fortress of bourgeois power. Sometimes the starting point of revolutionary politics is the 'international class' (the proletariat) and it is the task of this international class to master the original 'combination' represented by the national conjuncture; in other passages the starting point must be the national conjuncture and it is the goal (socialist revolution) which is international in character.

It will not be appropriate for us here to seek to 'unravel' the dialectical movement of Gramsci's thought which would explain some of these apparent inconsistencies. We simply insist that grasping the real meaning of the *Prison Notebooks* is a much more demanding task than Roberts seems to realise. We must also insist that however complex and cryptic Gramsci's thought may be, he never adopted a reformist standpoint towards the bourgeois state and the need for the working class to destroy that state if a path to socialism was to be opened up.

It is therefore quite wrong for Roberts to introduce Gramsci's argument in support of the strategy of *The British Road to Socialism*, and especially to do so without any serious attempt to elucidate Gramsci's real positions.

The Problem of Bourgeois Democracy

THERE IS A MAJOR THEME in Gramsci's writings on the specificity of the West which Roberts ignores altogether — significantly enough it is a point of partial convergence in the political thought of Gramsci and Trotsky. For both, a crucial defining feature of Governments in the bourgeois democratic states is that they rest on the consent of the masses — though the fundamental guarantee of bourgeois social relations remains the state repressive apparatus. Curiously enough there is no mention in Roberts' article of the fact that the 'western' social formations, to which he constantly refers in homilies directed at the FI, are today bourgeois democracies.

Instead he locates the specificity of these social formations solely in the 'ideological/cultural framework' and its supposed 'primacy'. Undoubtedly ideological and cultural institutions and practices do play a major role in bourgeois democratic systems since they help to produce the consent upon which the bourgeois democratic regime rests. [4] For this and other reasons the development of a systematic critique of, and assault upon, bourgeois cultural and ideological institutions and practices is a vital task for revolutionaries.

One of the most positive developments of recent years has been the advances made in this area by the women's movement; there are also signs of the beginning of a revolutionary critique of the educational and health care system. New forms of cultural contestation of bourgeois social relations have appeared in many fields. However it would be quite wrong to imagine, as Roberts appears to do, that there can be a self-sufficient project for establishing 'proletarian hegemony' in the cultural/ideological sphere, and that revolutionary politics is thereby rendered redundant [5]. The necessary struggle against the repressive and divisive structures and ideologies of capitalist society must not be regarded as a substitute

come up against the operation of the bourgeois political system. Any genuinely anti-capitalist movement will sooner or later have to face the question of the prevailing forms of bourgeois political power. In the bourgeois democracies this comprises a superstructure of Governments and parties which rest on the consent of the masses, and a state apparatus which rests on armed bodies of men. The state repressive apparatus is the lynchpin of bourgeois social relations, including the Governmental system itself.

In normal times a bourgeois democratic regime will approximately reflect the relationship of class forces within society. The writings of both Gramsci and of Trotsky furnish essential insights for understanding the operation of bourgeois democratic systems. Whereas Gramsci focussed on the cultural and ideological reproduction of consent to bourgeois social relations, Trotsky focussed on the political forms that the expression of this consent assumed.

Gramsci acknowledged that the operation of bourgeois hegemony in a bourgeois democracy involved the ability of the ruling class to make economic concessions (c.f. *Prison Notebooks* p. 182) to the dominated classes, but he never examined the different mechanisms by which these concessions were made. In Gramsci's later writings he has very little to say about the role of the reformist parties or of trade unions in a bourgeois democratic system; in his earlier writings there is a clearly ultra-left implication that they are simply capitalist institutions.

It is this absence in Gramsci's political thought that has permitted simultaneously a 'culturalist' and an ultra-left reading of his work where the interpreter makes up for the deficiency in his own way. It seems quite likely that the ultra-left interpretation of Gramsci (to be found on both the Italian and British far left) is closer to Gramsci's own predilections than the culturalist reformism that is convenient for the exponents of Euro-Communism.

Trotsky's account of the functioning of bourgeois democratic regimes gave great weight to the role of reformist workers parties in securing popular consent to the prevailing order. In a crucial passage he writes:

'In a developed capitalist society, during a "democratic" regime, the bourgeoisie leans for support primarily upon the working classes, which are held in check by the reformists. In its most finished form, this system finds its expression in Britain during the administration of a Labour Government as well as during that of the Conservatives.... In the course of



Enrico Berlinguer - Historic Compromiser

against it, their own strongholds and bases of proletarian democracy: the trade unions, the political parties, the educational and sports clubs, the co-operatives, etc. The proletariat cannot attain power within the formal limits of bourgeois democracy this has been proved by theory and experience. And these bulwarks of workers democracy within the bourgeois state are absolutely essential for taking the revolutionary road.' (*The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* p. 158-9).

Contemporary Marxist research on the capitalist state has also tended to focus attention on the

tarian democracy' was an advance upon the standard revolutionary critiques of bourgeois democracy. Early Communist writing on bourgeois democratic regimes unilaterally stressed the over-powering pressure of the bourgeois context on the one hand, the twin influences of 'corruption and the stock exchange' (as Engels and Lenin called it) and the different ways in which parliamentarism stonised and pulverised the citizen-voters on the other (see the powerful passage on this in George Lukacs' *Lenin*, pp65-6).

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'To change things vote Communist'—

its state and does indeed fragment and disorient the mass of the electorate. The exceptional interest of Trotsky's writings on Germany is that they point towards the way in which bourgeois democracy not only reflects the power of the bourgeoisie, but also seeks to incorporate the working class through its own independent organisations. Of course the type of proletarian representation encouraged by bourgeois parliamentary assemblies is that which perverts and falsifies the basic interests of the working class — but then Trotsky's experience of the Soviet Union made him fully aware that political representation can assume degenerate and distorted forms.

The novelty of Trotsky's analysis corresponds to the relative novelty of the phenomenon of mass working class parties, consolidating a large share of representation in bourgeois democratic assemblies and being able to envisage the formation of their own governments. In Russia, of course, conditions had been utterly different: trade unions were extremely weak and the Social Democrats had no chance of forming a Government under Tsarism. The watchwords of 1917 gave some intimation of the problems involved, with their appeals to the Mensheviks, invocation of workers control, transitional demands, etc. But the virtual impossibility of constructing a proper bourgeois state and political system amidst the debris of Tsarism, and under the pressure of war, meant that this experience was extremely foreshortened and exceptionally unfavourable for the bourgeoisie.

In Germany, Italy and, later, Spain, even weak bourgeois democratic forms proved capable of effectively defeating and containing the working class prior to the victory of fascism. But the eruption of workers councils or their equivalent in the wake of electoral

victory for the major workers parties, or in response to the threat of military coup against a Government based on workers parties, has also pointed to the potentially explosive contradictions contained by bourgeois democracy (France and Spain in 1936, Chile in 1973). As Norman Geras has written:

'The organisational strength which the working class is able to build up can become a serious threat to bourgeois rule once it begins to be released in the direction of proletarian self-activity and self-organisation which overflow bourgeois democracy's constricting framework and paralyse its function as the political expropriator of the initiatives of the masses. Bourgeois democracy itself furnishes points of support from which such initiatives towards proletarian democracy and power can be launched.' [6]

Historically, bourgeois democracy has served the function of favouring that section of the ruling class which is best able to integrate the masses. But when the parliamentary 'barometer' of class relations indicates an approaching storm then the mechanisms of political integration can be broken. In these circumstances a Government comprising workers parties can only sustain itself by basing itself on the extra-parliamentary power of the working class and its allies — by promoting Soviet-type bodies and initiating a break with capitalism.

The circumstance that the democratic bourgeois regime rests on mass consent, and seeks to incorporate the workers organisations, dictates the strategy and tactics that revolutionaries should adopt: hence the central debates within the Fourth International on the nature of transitional demands and a transitional programme, and on the question of the united front. Hence also the attention given to the possibility of the

formation of 'workers governments' within the bourgeois regime, that set out to break with capitalism and to develop a workers power capable of settling accounts with the bourgeois state apparatus.

All these political pre-occupations have roots in the discussions of the early years of the Comintern and before, but with Trotsky's writings of the thirties, and the subsequent debates within the Trotskyist movement, they were systematically related to the experience of class struggle in the advanced countries. As Trotsky insists in his writings on France, the relationship that should exist between the political vanguard and the masses is one of 'dialogue' in which the vanguard will have much to learn about the real situation of the masses and about the best means of developing an anti-capitalist struggle [7].

However although spontaneous and 'inherited' anti-capitalist reactions have a fundamental significance for Trotskyists, naturally they cannot by themselves bring down the capitalist order. Popular movements against the bourgeois order always contain spontaneous or 'inherited' reactionary elements (e.g. racism, sexism etc) as well as more advanced ideas and tactics than the revolutionary vanguard could dream up by itself. The task of the revolutionary party for Trotskyists, and of the 'hegemonic' party for Gramsci, is that of giving coherence and direction to the movement of the masses.

It is quite false to counter-pose a 'mechanistic' Trotskyist conception to a more complex and dialectical Gramscian conception. Trotskyists, and even Trotsky himself, have been responsible on occasion for vanguardist errors which mis-estimated the readiness of the masses to undertake a struggle against the bourgeois order. But Trotsky and the Trotskyist

movement have always fought for a proletarian democracy which enables such errors to be corrected and overcome. The acceptance of the right of organised political currents to compete for leadership within the revolutionary organisation and the fight for proletarian democracy within the workers movement as a whole are the only sure antidotes to vanguardist errors.

[4] We will leave on one side the question of whether the family or religion are unimportant props of the prevailing order in pre-capitalist social formations, since no historical or anthropological evidence is advanced by Roberts on this point.

[5] There is also a danger of class reductionism in proposing the struggle for 'proletarian' hegemony in the cultural and ideological field, since this can involve a sectarian nihilism towards the cultural achievements of the bourgeoisie or neglect of democratic demands that are not purely proletarian in character. It is significant that the big defeat of Christian Democracy in Italy on divorce was the result of the campaign sponsored by the petty bourgeois Radical Party and opposed by the Italian Communist Party.

[6] Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*, p81. See pp51-83 for a valuable discussion on the question of bourgeois democracy and pp111-133 on transitional demands.

[7] For an important discussion of the relationship between the revolutionary vanguard and the masses see Ernest Mandel, *The Leninist Theory of Organisation*, IMG 1975. If Roberts had not been bent on caricature he might have devoted some consideration to this essay by Mandel.



— but the masses have their own ideas of how to change things.

Proletarian Democracy

IN GRAMSCI'S WRITINGS, by contrast, there is on occasion a dangerous ambiguity on the question of proletarian democracy. He sometimes conflates the role of the vanguard party and that of soviet-type bodies, instead of theorising the relationship between the two. Thus in 1920 after the failure of the Turin workers councils Gramsci impatiently declared:

'... a revolutionary movement can only be based on the proletarian vanguard, and must be led without prior consultation, without the apparatus of representative assemblies. Revolution is like imperative war; it must be minutely prepared by a working class General Staff just as war is by the army's General Staff. Assemblies can only ratify what has already taken place, exalt the successful and implacably punish the unsuccessful.' ('Political Capacity', *New Left Review*, no 51, Sept-Oct 1968, p57)

A similar theme in *The Modern Prince* leads him to argue that the hegemonic party should be 'monolithic' and that there should be 'homogeneity' between the leadership and the rank and file. (*Prison Notebooks*, p138)

If these peremptory remarks are read carefully, and in context, they clearly relate to the imperative necessity for a revolutionary party united in its agreement on the fundamental questions. Gramsci was certainly aware of the dangers of 'bureaucratic centralism' (*Prison Notebooks* p. 188-9). But he did not discuss the relationship between the indispensable revolutionary vanguard and the sovereignty of the soviet. Gramsci's ambivalence on this question leads not to culturalist reformism but to the notion of one party soviets. It also induces a blindness to a central problem of the contemporary workers movement — its extreme organisational disunity.

The experience of Stalinism made Trotsky acutely sensitive to this question and to the danger of voluntaristic and administrative 'solutions' to it. Trotsky contrasted the political differentiation and competition of a healthy workers movement with the bureaucratic straitjacket of Stalinism:

'The dynamic of political consciousness is excluded from the historical process in the interests of administrative order. In reality classes are heterogeneous; they are torn by inner antagonisms, and arrive at the solution of common problems no otherwise than through an inner struggle of tendencies, groups and parties.' (*The Revolution Betrayed*, p145).

Trotsky saw the soviet, or its preparatory form, the united front, as providing the framework for both united action and political differentiation. The problem of the diversity of the workers movement;

no amount of huffing and puffing or Gramscian posturing is going to transform the CPGB or the International Socialists into the 'hegemonic party' of the working class.

The path of proletarian democracy is not valued by Trotskyists simply for itself but because it represents the only method of tapping the full energies of a developed workers movement. In the advanced capitalist states, where the bourgeoisie has many

For Roberts the advocacy of revolutionary politics must necessarily isolate the frozen unity which is sought within 'the left': for Trotsky 'the struggle of the party to win over the majority of the class must in no instance come into opposition with the need of the workers to keep unity within their fighting ranks.' (*The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, p164). For Trotskyists the united front is so far from being a transient 'cunning manoeuvre' that its highest form is the soviet, within which the different political currents

not used to fight for the right of the party to affiliate collectively with full rights as a constituent part of the Labour Party. In fact, the leaders of the CPGB seem to prefer to shelter behind the Labour left and to deny Communist politics an open forum within the labour movement. The Labour leadership will, of course, bitterly oppose the right of the CPGB, IS or IMG to affiliate to the Labour Party, but those on the left who refuse to insist on that right become accomplices of an unrepresentative and undemocratic party regime.

A vigorous and successful electoral intervention by the forces to the left of the Labour Party based on resistance to the policies of the Government and a series of transitional demands is under present circumstances an indispensable accompaniment to a fight for the right to affiliate to the Labour Party. Up till now neither the CPGB nor the far left has yet been able to put up a serious challenge to Labour, at either local or national level. Given its historical implantation in the British workers movement, the repeated failure of the CPGB in elections represents a crippling political defeat for the Party and the conception of socialism which it promotes.

Because of its historic compromise with Stalinism the CPGB has long abandoned the approach to parliament indicated by Lenin in *Left-Wing Communism*. In response to a letter from a member of the CPGB when it was a very different organisation Lenin wrote:

'The writer of the letter is perfectly clear on the point that only workers Soviets, and not Parliament, can be the instrument whereby the aims of the proletariat can be achieved. And, of course, those who have failed to understand this up to now are inveterate reactionaries, even if they are the most highly educated people, most experienced politicians, most sincere socialists, most erudite Marxists, and most honest citizens and family men. But the writer of this letter does not even ask, it does not occur to him to ask, whether it is possible to bring about the victory of the Soviets over Parliament, without getting pro-Soviet politicians into parliament, without disintegrating parliamentarism from within, without working within parliament for the success of the Soviets in their forth coming task of dispersing parliament.'

The task of popularising workers power and socialism which the CPGB has so signally failed to accomplish must now be carried out by others. Certainly the time is long overdue when the revolutionary socialist alternative, excluded by the Labour leaders from the official political structures of the labour movement, should be vigorously asserted in local and national politics.

[8] See Robin Blackburn, 'Let It Bleed', *Red Mole* no 3 1970. For a correction see Robin Blackburn 'Labour and the Marxist Left' in *New Statesman*, 14



Portuguese building workers besiege the Provisional Government in support of their wage demands.

resources at its disposal, only an unfettered mobilisation and expression of proletarian power will be capable of destroying the political power of the bourgeoisie. There will be no bureaucratic centrist short-cut to socialist revolution.

In Roberts' article there is a systematic evasion or denial of proletarian democracy. Thus Roberts refers derisively to the FI being 'split from top to bottom' (p47), to the 'factional strife which confounds organisations like the IMG' and to Trotskyist theory being 'open-ended' in its immediate practical implications (p55). For Roberts advocacy of a united front within the workers movement means either the CP's 'principled' concept of 'strategic unity of the left' or a mere tactical manoeuvre designed to destroy the

seek to win over the majority.

Roberts rebukes the IMG several times with carefully selected quotations from Lenin's *Left Wing Communism*, and it is true that ultra-left errors on the question of the Labour Party have appeared in the publications and practical work of this revolutionary organisation — including views expressed by the present authors [8]. Yet Roberts and the CPGB have conveniently forgotten, firstly, that this work in no way rejected the overriding necessity for finding the path to the creation of soviet-type bodies; secondly, that Lenin argued that Communists should conduct a systematic campaign for affiliation to the Labour Party.

The CPGB enjoys considerable influence within the

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Chile - the latest disaster for Stalinist Class Collaboration Policies.

advocate the dictatorship of the proletariat and the need for the working class to destroy the repressive apparatus of the bourgeois state. (cf. Etienne Balibar, *La Dictature du Proletariat*, Paris 1976). But again the common denominator of these different attempts to remedy a felt deficiency in Euro-Communism is an incomprehension of proletarian democracy and internationalism. Again the substitute for revolutionary politics that we are offered is the struggle for proletarian hegemony in the ideological and cultural domain.

In this reply to Geoff Roberts we have argued that to award primacy to this domain necessarily means avoiding the task of developing the tactics and strategy that socialist revolution in the West will require. We do not think that merely supplementing this perspective by an insistence on smashing the state, Balibar-style, represents a fundamental correction. It is the writings and activity of Trotsky and the debates

of the Fourth International which represent the necessary starting point for revolutionary politics in a world where socialism is still widely identified with Stalinism and where the only democracy known to the mass of workers is that accepted by the bourgeoisie.

[9] indeed Trotsky writes 'national peculiarity is nothing else but the most general product of the unevenness of historical development, its summary result so to say. It is only necessary to understand this unevenness correctly, to consider it in its full extent and also to extend it to the pre-capitalist past. A faster or slower development of the productive forces; the expanded or contrarily, the contracted character of entire historical epochs — for example, the Middle Ages, the guild system, enlightened absolutism, parliamentarism; the uneven development of different branches of the economy, different classes, different social institutions, different fields of culture — all these lie at the base of these 'national peculiarities'. The peculiarity of a national social type is a crystallisation of the unevenness of its formation'. [Permanent Revolution, 'Introduction to the German Edition', New York 1958, p24].

Trotsky was at pains to point out the following on this question of the originality of national conjunctures: 'This originality can be of decisive significance for revolutionary strategy over a span of many years... It is absolutely wrong to base the activity of the Communist Parties on some "general features", that is, on an abstract type of national capitalism.' [op. cit. p23].

[10] The original national combination represented by British politics contains both a historic identification with Stalinism on the part of a narrow layer of militant class conscious workers and a deep reaction to it on the part of the mass of the working class. In both cases good and bad motives become very mixed.

[11] The coercive apparatus of the state will indeed have to be broken up, but this can only be done in advanced societies on the firm class basis provided by soviet-type bodies. The effective high command of the repressive apparatus of the bourgeois state will function as the last, and most formidable, 'party' of the ruling class. Revolutionaries should demand trade union and democratic rights for soldiers, and a Government based on workers parties should seek to dismantle the repressive apparatus in favour of workplace militias, etc. But only the victory of a new power can complete the disintegration of the old and the decisive test of strength should be well prepared for in advance. The workers movement must never again be 'surprised' as it was on 11 September 1973.



'La Pasionaria' - Still looking for the the progressive bourgeoisie.

National 'Peculiarities' and Internationals

ONE OF THE MOST fundamental misconceptions contained in Roberts' article is the account it gives of Trotsky's conception of the nature of national conjunctures. According to Roberts:

'In Trotsky's analysis the nation-state is seen purely as an epi-phenomenon of the world economy.' (p51)

But the quotations that Roberts produces to substantiate this representation of Trotsky's position in fact refer not to 'world economy', but to the 'world process' or 'world development'. For Trotskyists the world process comprises politics as well as economics. If all nation states were the epi-phenomenon of capitalist world economy, which is undoubtedly the most powerful sector of world economy, then there could be no bureaucratized workers states.

According to Trotsky 'the specific features of national economy, no matter how great, enter as component parts and in increasing measure into the higher reality which is called world economy and on which alone, in the last analysis, the internationalism of the Communist parties rests.' To the world economy corresponds the development of the proletariat as an international class. But this insistence on the subordinate relationship of each national economy to the world economy in no way cancels out the history or politics. [9]

Capitalist world economy both dominates, and is dependent upon its chief supports — the various bourgeois nation states. It is because the bourgeois state is an absolutely necessary, and relatively autonomous instrument of class power that it must be smashed if capitalist social relations are to be suppressed. If the nation state was a mere 'epi-phenomenon' of world economy then it could be by-passed altogether.

Significantly enough it is Roberts who imagines that the bourgeois state can be somehow conjured out of existence. He attacks the 'IMG's omission of precisely that which is most specific to the national level (the ideological/cultural framework) and from which flows the relative autonomy of that level and its primacy as an analytic point of departure.' (p54)

Thus what is 'most specific' to the 'national level' is not the state and its attendant institutions, the concentrated embodiment of society's uneven development, but solely the unanchored realm of ideology and culture.

It is this perspective which leads Roberts to the bizarre conclusion that the overthrow of Allende demonstrates the danger of 'frontal attack in a period when it can only lead to defeat.' (p51) Yet as readers

issue, the Chilean CP did not neglect to attempt to deal with the problem of the repressive state apparatus by ideological appeals (in this case to the professionalism and patriotism of the officers).

In Roberts' view socialists should not be pre-occupied with the problem of the state or the political system. They should forget about the past and devote themselves to the 'present moment', and they should seek to shut out the international basis of national existence [9] The timeless task of socialists is to cultivate the ideological soil of their own national garden. This is, no doubt, a welcome message to bring to a party many of whose problems derive from what happened in the past, in another country.

But the heavy heritage of Stalinism cannot be exorcised by reference to the supposedly absolute autonomy of national traditions, as the CP's parliamentary candidates must now be well aware. Until Communists openly settle accounts with the record of Stalinism in both the past and present, in the Soviet Union and in Western Europe, their policies will offer a distorted and crippled caricature of socialism.

Such a settling of accounts would have to include a due acknowledgement of the historic struggle of those who fought against Stalin in defence of proletarian internationalism and proletarian democracy. We may be separated from the times in which Trotsky lived, but bridging that gulf are the essential structures of the Stalinist regime analysed by the author of *The Revolution Betrayed*.

As traditional Stalinist politics disintegrate, two tendencies struggle for dominance within it. In Western Europe the dominant tendency capitulates to bourgeois democracy (naturally without calling it by its right name); at the same time the individual party member is permitted more freedom and certain repressive features of Soviet society are criticised. On the other hand there is a truculent current that remains loyal to the original Stalinist project and still dreams of a 'Czechoslovak' path to 'socialism'.

A crucial common denominator for these two tendencies is a rejection of the need for soviet-type bodies and a denial of proletarian democracy in the party and in the wider workers movement. The bureaucratic party regime may allow individual expression of dissent; but it rules out the organised expression of political differences within the party — the right of tendency and faction in the true Leninist sense. Because the party regime cannot tolerate such political differences an organisational split ensues (Greece, Spain, Finland). These different sections are also united in rejecting a crucial source of strength for the 'international class' (Gramsci): namely the internationalist co-ordination of the struggles of the working class against capitalism and imperialism and against bureaucratic usurpation in the East.

The perspective offered by Geoff Roberts in his critique of the FI and IMG shares the explicit reformism and avowedly national perspective of Euro-Communism but seeks to make this strategy appear more profound by decking it out in pseudo-Gramscian garb. There is also a left culturalist current

INTERNATIONAL

Volume 3 Number 2 Winter 1976
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