



# A Critic of Trotskyism

Andy Yorke Wed, 27/06/2012 - 15:44

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Pham Binh, an American socialist, has written a series of articles criticising far left groups on his Planet Anarchy website. This includes a critique of Trotskyism, asserting that its failure to create mass parties or lead revolutions is primarily due to the elevation of programme above all else. Since Pham Binh's ideas played an important part in the recent split from Workers Power in the UK and have become fashionable amongst sections of the left, Andy Yorke replies.

Pham Binh entitles his critique 'Trotskyism', but in fact it would be more accurate if it were called 'The Trotskyists' since he hardly criticises the main ideas or practice of Leon Trotsky. Indeed, he says that Trotsky's struggle 'helped preserve and expand on the Marxist tradition' tradition meaning the ideas, strategy, and tactics that guide the actions of revolutionary socialists? That is above all else Trotskyism's enduring value.?

If indeed these 'ideas, strategy and tactics' (otherwise known as a programme) are of 'enduring value' one wonders why Pham Binh 'whose central theme is the Trotskyists' obsession with programme' does not explain how what was so valuable before 1940 became worthless and dangerous thereafter.

His first charge is however the irrelevance of Trotskyist groups and parties:

'The main difficulty with Trotskyist organisations, groups, and parties is that they have been unable to become mass parties like the Bolsheviks or even influential within the workers' movement of any country during any period in the past 70-80 years. No colonies were liberated, no ruling classes were overthrown, and no fascists were defeated by Trotskyist forces.'

Pham Binh seems to think this is a real knock down argument. But there is one problem here. This 'failure' applies not only to Trotskyists, with their supposedly obsessive concern with programme. Countless Maoist groups (outside of China, Indonesia and India), plus many Moscow loyal Communist Parties (outside the Stalinist states and a handful of other countries, like Italy or India) also remained small sects.

This 'failure' applies almost universally to anarchists (outside of Spain in the 1930s). And it applies to groups in Italy in the 1970s and elsewhere that were as plural, broad and without a programme as Pham Binh could wish. 'Clearly some other factor is at work condemning groups to marginality besides a supposed obsession with programme or too strict a 'democratic centralist regime' which Pham Binh adds later on as a cause of the Trotskyists' impotence.

## Trotskyists and revolutions

But Pham Binh is wrong, too, when he asserts Trotskyists never had mass influence or led struggles. He concedes the fact that the US Trotskyists had significant influence in the revival of US trade unionism in the 1930s and in the anti-Vietnam War movement of the 1960s. But there are other examples.

In Vietnam in 1939 the Trotskyists launched a daily paper, won 80 per cent of the votes to the Cochin China Colonial Council. In August 1945 they emerged as the main opposition to the Stalinists, with tens of thousands joining its contingents on demos. They initiated and led many of the 150 'People's Committees' in Southern Vietnam.

However, the Stalinists under Ho Chi Minh were murderous foes of the Trotskyists and had behind them a superpower:

the Soviet Union. Far from fighting for national liberation, they supported the return of French imperialism, backed by British troops. Then they bloodily repressed the workers' committees and slaughtered the Trotskyists.

Similarly the Bolivian Trotskyists of the POR played a leading part in founding the powerful miners' union and COB trade union centre in 1946 - drafting its programme, the Pulacayo Theses. They played a key role in the armed uprising during the Bolivian revolution of April 1952. The POR lacked neither influence nor revolutionary experience.

The reason the POR did not become a mass party was not sectarian obsession with programme, but opportunist tailing of the nationalist MNR. Its practical strategy (its real not its formal programme) diverged from that of Trotsky's idea of 'permanent revolution'.

The Trotskyist LSSP was the first mass workers' party in Sri Lanka and led the 1953 general strike. However, throughout the 1950s the practice of the LSSP was increasingly limited to elections and trade unionism. In 1956 they gave the bourgeois SLFP government 'responsive co-operation' and in 1960 they offered Simaravo Bandaranaike's Sinhala chauvinist regime 'critical support'.

Adapt or update?

Indeed far from the post-war Trotskyists being obsessed with purity of programme, after 1948-51 their main weakness was its relegation of The Transitional Programme of 1938 to the status of an holy relic, and its replacement in practice with the politics of various social democratic, Stalinist, or left nationalist forces.

Though becoming mass parties was their overriding objective, their adaptation to Bevanism in Britain, to Stalinism in France and Italy, to Maoism in Asia, and to Peronism, Castroism or Guevarism in Latin America brought them no breakthroughs. Why join a fake reformist, Stalinist or Guevarist party if there are real ones around?

Far from overestimating programme they ignored it. What Pham Binh calls the unorthodox Trotskyists, like Tony Cliff and the SWP tradition, openly dumped it. Since the 1960s they have scarcely mentioned programme. In fact it is no wonder that Pham Binh acknowledges Duncan Hallas (SWP ideologue) as the originator of many of his criticisms.

In fact the whole subjective side of post-war Trotskyists' weaknesses has been their insufficient appreciation of the 'valuable ideas, strategy, and tactics' inherited from Trotsky. Of course they should not have simply clung to the 1938 document; they should have regularly updated the programme to meet new challenges.

But objective economic and geo-strategic conditions also played a huge role in preventing the Trotskyists from building mass parties. The 1950s and 1960s witnessed an unprecedented boom in Europe and North America, where most Trotskyist groups were located. Social democracy and the bureaucratized trade unions flourished. A welfare state, rising wages and full employment seemed to validate reformism and disprove revolutionary Marxism. In the imperialist heartlands outside of Italy and France, not just Trotskyism but Marxism was reduced to an isolated and often a persecuted minority.

At the same time Trotskyism's mortal enemy, Stalinism, far from going into crisis as Trotsky had predicted, prospered and expanded, even making revolutions, albeit ones that ended in totalitarian dictatorship. No wonder the Trotskyists debated and split over how to analyse these developments. Historic issues were at stake: not least whether the revolutionary programme was a utopia, and whether Stalinism or even social democracy could perform the historic tasks of social revolution.

If the Trotskyist (and Maoist and Stalinist and anarchist) groups survived in a sect-like condition this was hardly surprising. As Karl Marx said, 'So long as the sects are (historically) justified, the working class is not yet ripe for an independent historic movement.' (Marx to Bolte Nov 1871) The tying of the working class to the bourgeoisie, whether through the US Democrats, the Peronists, European social democracy or Anglo-Saxon Labourism, explains in large measure the sect like existence of all subjectively revolutionary trends. What it does not excuse is continued sectarianism in the 1970s and 1980s or today.

Programme or living movement?

Trotskyist groups elevated their political program (meaning their statement of principles, formal positions, and theoretical ideas) to being the most important thing. The American SWP's founder James P. Cannon put it this way: "in the last analysis the programme decides everything". By contrast, Marx and Engels argued that in the last analysis it is struggle and (class) conflict that decide everything." (Pham Binh)

Pham Binh's contrast of programme with the class struggle and his wrenching of the Cannon quote is really bizarre. Cannon, no more than Trotsky, Lenin or Marx, would not have contrasted the class struggle to programme. This division is more in keeping with the revisionist Eduard Bernstein's "the movement is everything, the goal nothing". In what context does Cannon say that "in the last analysis the programme decides everything"?

The revolutionary socialist movement of the present, although numerically smaller, is ideologically richer than its predecessors. Insofar as it has assimilated the experience of the past, in this and other countries, and incorporated their lessons in its programme, it is better prepared to understand its tasks. That represents progress for American socialism in the highest degree, for in the last analysis the programme decides everything.

At the same time, it is obvious that the progressive growth of the industrial labour movement has not been accompanied by a corresponding development of the class consciousness of the workers. On the contrary, the recent years have seen a decline in this respect; and this is reflected in the numerical weakness of socialist political organisation. That is certainly a reactionary manifestation." (James P. Cannon, Marxists Internet Archive)

Clearly what Cannon is saying is that for the revolutionary organisation its strategy for taking power (its programme) ? whether it is adequate to the task or not ? will indeed decide everything. If it is weak or false then the working class will suffer defeat. This is incontestably true, indeed a truism for a Leninist.

The really decisive fact is that the revolution is a conscious act of a working class. But this can only happen if the revolutionary vanguard has won the class to the goals, tactics and methods of organisation contained in its programme. Of course these masses, in their vast majority, will never read the programme or give their formal assent to it. Rather the party, like the Bolsheviks in 1917, turns its key elements into popular slogans: "all power to the soviets?", "Bread peace and land?", "Workers control of production?", etc. Obviously no tiny sect can achieve this. It can only happen if a revolutionary party has already created deep roots in the class.

Trotsky's reason for believing the Left Opposition could "switch the points" in Germany in 1931 was related to the acuteness of the crisis, the rise of Hitler, the fact that millions of German Communists and Social Democrats knew Trotsky was the organiser of the October Revolution and that the Left Opposition was arguing for the antifascist united front, which many of them already realised was vital. Trotsky argued "a sharp axe can hew heavy beams", by which he meant objectively vital slogans argued for skilfully, even by a relatively small nucleus of cadres, can cut through the obstruction of mass bureaucratic parties.

But since all his tactics in the 1930s were designed to help his followers gain roots in the working class, the charge that Trotsky thought the correct programme alone was enough to lead revolutions to victory falls to the ground.

Pham Binh's most laughable mobilisation of "facts" is one all too familiar to those who know Tony Cliff's interpretation of revolutionary history. He says:

The Bolsheviks were too busy leading the revolution to settle on the programme that would supposedly decide everything in time for the fall 1917 insurrection that Trotsky himself organised and led. How is that for irony? Treating the programme as primary instead of secondary and subordinate to the material, living movement of working people led to issues that have plagued the Trotskyist movement from its inception until today.?

This is the old argument that because the Bolsheviks failed to amend the 1903 programme they either made the October Revolution with "the wrong programme" or with no programme at all ? or maybe "Bread, Peace, Land" (just three words!) was their only programme. Another three words reduce this silly argument to dust: The April Theses.

These replaced (not formally but actually) the sections of the 1903 programme that were based on the Russian

Revolution being a bourgeois revolution, they inserted the lessons of 1905 and February 1917: the struggle for power centred on a republic of workers soviets not a democratic republic, the smashing of the capitalist state, the spreading of the revolution internationally in the context of imperialist war, the armed insurrection, etc.

In short they re-elaborated the Bolshevik programme, which in any case had been added to by programmatic resolutions of the congresses in 1905, 1906, 1907 and 1912. Only someone hidebound by pragmatism and formal logic could imagine that programme is embodied in a single document or that the Bolsheviks were too busy making the revolution to work out what they were doing.

## Centrism

Pham Binh completely misses the source of post-war Trotskyism's failure to develop mass parties. During the crucial opportunities to make a breakthrough from small groups it is largely the centrist deviations and distortions of the Marxist programme by these propaganda societies that have blocked the route to growth, not the insistence that acceptance of this programme and agreement to fight for it form the basis for membership.

In the 1930s Trotsky countered critics who pointed to the slow growth and setbacks suffered by the International Communist League (ICL) as signs of inherent weakness, bringing the debate back to the question of programme?.

?Our international work began only in 1929 ? and not on virgin territory, but on territory saturated with old and powerful organisations, and with new, confused, and often treacherous organisations that claimed adherence to our principles? The real issue is the question of programme, of the historical orientation of the tendency. The issue is a new chapter in the struggle between Marxism and centrism ? a struggle that characterises our epoch.?

With tragic prescience, Trotsky identified the future fate of the Spanish ex-Trotskyist Andreu Nin and his group, the POUM .The POUM was founded on a rotten compromise between organisations with incompatible programmes. Rather than putting unity above political clarity and organisational effectiveness, Trotsky rightly made programme the precondition of unity: ?Unity is an excellent thing. But demarcation on the question of the Marxist programme must precede unity? in order for that unity to be honest and long lasting.?

Though it grew from 10,000 to 40,000 in 1936-37, Trotsky warned the POUM would fail the test of the Spanish revolution and in addition ?break their necks?. Nin?s entry into the Catalan Popular Front involved him in the task of holding back the workers? revolution to bourgeois limits. But because the POUM was a centrist party ? with a courageous, subjectively revolutionary membership ? the Stalinists and the bourgeois parties were determined to crush it, and they did.

Should Trotsky have put unity with Nin and the Spanish POUM above the question of programme? This could only have resulted in the whole of the international Trotskyist movement being disoriented by Nin?s errors, setting back the Marxist movement on the eve of world war. The small group of Spanish Trotskyists did of course work inside the POUM ? i.e. they did not isolate themselves ? but they did not abandon their criticism of the POUM.

In the midst of a new historic crisis of capitalism, revolutionaries would do well to heed this advice, rather than uncritically support parties like Syriza because they have enough support to be ?decisive?.

## Internationalism and theory

Pham Binh complains that part of the supposedly too high level of programmatic agreement demanded of membership was also wrongly based on ?foreign? issues:

?Disagreements about theory or issues facing revolutionaries in foreign countries led to splits and the resultant groups require future members to agree to their side of the issue that led to the split.

?The SWP?s 1939-40 debate over whether or not to defend the Soviet Union would have been relevant and important if SWP members were organising in the Soviet Union and had to figure out what to do with Stalin?s police state on the one side and the prospect of Nazi invasion and occupation on the other, a daunting challenge to say the least.

Fortunately, it was a harrowing reality the SWP did not face; unfortunately, they divided their forces over it??

Leaving aside for the moment the fact that the SWP were part of the Fourth International, which had had 10,000 members in the Soviet Gulag fighting by hunger strikes the totalitarian regime of Stalin, and that the debate occurred at the onset of a world war, in which the side that the working class should take was supremely relevant to US workers, this shows Pham Binh's extreme national centeredness. Surely the question of whether you adopt a defencist or a neutral position in a war is of some importance for a political organisation?

Also, far from trying to force a split, Trotsky did everything possible to avoid one, including trying to persuade the minority around Max Shachtman and James Burnham to express their views in party publications ? provided they did not claim this was the line of the SWP or act against this line. It was the minority who split, precisely because they could not bear to be associated with the USSR after the Stalin-Hitler Pact and the carving up of Poland.

Lenin certainly thought defeatism or defencism in an imperialist war was a defining question ? even a split issue. In the First World War he fought ? against Trotsky amongst others ? to demand a break not only from the openly chauvinist socialists who supported their own ruling class, but also from those like Karl Kautsky who would not go beyond a pacifist position. Pham Binh is to be congratulated for taking the toughest example that he could come up with for his own argument, but it actually destroys rather than reinforces his position.

Pham Binh's article ends with a demagogic attack, but it too boomerangs on him:

?Trotskyist groups? require a very high level of theoretical-political agreement, dedicating many hours a week to recruiting and retaining new members in the name of ?party building?. At the same time, only a small proportion of time, effort, and resources go to leading and organising militant struggles for tangible gains like rent control or a living wage.??Is this so? Well whatever criticism we have of the main Trotskyist groups? sectarianism or opportunism, failure to engage in militant struggles is certainly not one of them. On the other hand the reader may be moved to inquire what the proportion of their time Pham Binh or Louis Proyect spend on ?struggles for tangible gains?.

Comparing the websites like the Unrepentant Marxist (Proyect) or Planet Anarchy with the sites of the Trotskyist ?sects? does not indicate the advantage lies with our critics. They might ask themselves why, if arguing over the finer points of programme and revolutionary history is so unimportant, they themselves devote so much time and space to it.

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