Ways of thinking: Trotsky on dialectics

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Leon Trotsky’s writings are a rich source of advice to activists about how to solve difficult political problems. Keith Harvey draws attention to his insights:

"The dialectic is neither fiction nor mysticism, but a science of the forms of our thinking insofar as it is not limited to the daily problems of life but attempts to arrive at an understanding of more complicated and drawn-out processes."  

We are living in a time of historic changes and reversals in world politics. These sudden changes, revolutions and counter-revolutions, are themselves the product of complicated and drawn-out processes. The end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the death of Stalinism as a pole of ideological attraction for the struggles of the world’s oppressed and exploited, are just the most obvious manifestations of this.

These events have, in their turn, brought into play long dormant conflicts and given them renewed importance. The unity of imperialism, which revolutionaries have taken as given for nearly half a century, is beginning to break up.

The increasing conflicts between the imperialist powers, expressed in the tensions between Europe and the USA over policing the new world order in former Yugoslavia and Somalia, present revolutionaries with new and, at the same time, old, problems.

In periods such as the present one, just as in the 1945-50 period when the old world order was constructed, a failure to apply a dialectical political method in analysing these shifts and turns will result not only in a higher than usual number of errors of perspective and programme but in a qualitative degeneration.

This is because, in relatively stable times, when change is slow and the political and economic landscape seems frozen, the concepts and ideas we have accumulated over time our doctrine work well enough for us to understand what is going on around us. But, in a period where, in Marx’s words, there may come days in which twenty years are embodied then established doctrine alone is insufficient for us to orient ourselves.

In the light of new and unique historical experiences, we need to re-elaborate our ideas, discarding any aspects of our doctrine that have proven inadequate in the test of life. In such times, there is a premium on a political militant having and using a correct political method, that is the dialectical method. As Lenin said, Dialectics is the theory of knowledge of Marxism.

Without such a method, revolutionaries can fall prey to dogmatism, impressionism or an eclectic combination of the two. The former arises from an insistence either that reality has not changed or that all its changes can be accommodated within existing conceptual frameworks.
New phenomena are simply reduced to old ones, or rejected out of hand since they do not fit into the dogmatists' lifeless schemas. This approach turns Marxism into a sterile orthodoxy. The orthodoxy of a Kautsky or a Cannon is only marking time until it collapses into opportunism.

Its apparent opposite, shallow impressionism, occurs as a result of a hasty reaction to the most immediate changes in appearances. It sees these changes as invalidating the entire existing theoretical or methodological framework. Its changes of analysis do not proceed on the basis of the same method but rather by abandoning it completely. The bitter fruit of this method is wholesale revisionism.

How can we ensure that what we achieve in periods like the present is a creative re-elaboration, rather than a destructive revision, of the Marxist programme? Naturally, to stress the need for a correct method, even assuming we understand what this method consists of, does not guarantee in advance correct results for our analysis.

Results have to be judged both from their ability to explain and anticipate real movements in the world and to attract working class forces to fight for them, as well as from the logical internal consistency of the concepts and their compatibility with Marxist fundamentals.

A mastery of the dialectical method, then, is not simply a debate about Marxist philosophy, whose defence is the task of party intellectuals, while those with little inclination for High Theory can be allowed to get on with practical struggles on the streets or in the factories. On the contrary, it is about consciously mastering a way of understanding the world, a world within which we seek to act at definite points in order to change its direction. As Trotsky remarked:

"Dialectical training of the mind [is] as necessary to a revolutionary fighter as five finger exercises to a pianist..."

Thus, whilst hatred of capitalist exploitation and oppression is a necessary starting point for a revolutionary fighter, it is insufficient for a party seeking to lead the working class by guiding and directing it to the seizure of state power.

What would any worker think of a "doctor" who, negligent of the achievements of biology or anatomy, of the development of a foetus from conception to birth, was armed only with the view that childbirth was one of the beautiful mysteries of life given to us by God? They would recognise such a person immediately as a quack not be entrusted for one minute with the care of a future mother.

The same holds good for politics. It is possible to arrive at the right conclusions by hunches, or political "horse sense". But such successes will have an accidental character. The point is that a systematic, generally consistent analysis and, therefore, the strategy and tactics based upon it, is only possible with a correct political method.

There are laws that govern thinking about the real world "out there". They have to be grasped and used in any act of conscious investigation. Trotsky as a practical activist, as the main leader of the October insurrection and the organiser of the Red Army, as well as a brilliant theoretician, was absolutely insistent on this point.

Unlike Lenin, he never wrote a book devoted to philosophy as such. But he far from neglected the subject. What concerned him most in his writings was how to train party cadre in the method of dialectical logic, so as to equip them with a method of research and analysis. The aim was to enable the cadre to arrive at correct programmatic conclusions and then seek verification for their conclusions in the practice of the party and the class.
Trotsky often used the analogy that “philosophy” was like a toolmakers’ guild in relation to all the other sciences. The toolmaker was essential to various branches of production but was not a substitute for them. Armed with the materialist dialectic alone, but ignorant or scornful of the subject matter in all its empirical detail, one will simply make a mess. But armed with it and with the relevant knowledge, real advances can be made.

There is considerable prejudice about “dialectics” amongst those brought up in Anglo-Saxon countries. These difficulties arise because the Anglo-Saxon world has for centuries been the home of a very different method; we call it empiricism. We can crudely sum this method up in the phrase, “seeing is believing?,” or less crudely, “we don’t know anything about the world except what is provided through experience, through our five senses?”.

Trotsky once argued that British empiricism had a certain merit compared to other methods used. For example, rational idealism, very common in the culture of continental Europe, is a conscious enemy of materialism and the dialectic. It fiercely defends the self-sufficiency of formal logic, especially the syllogism, against dialectics and, indeed, against the unexpected discoveries of the natural and other sciences. It seeks in Reason a world of eternal and unchanging truths.

Empiricism, by contrast, contains a primitive, underdeveloped form of the dialectic. By this, Trotsky meant that, where dialectical thought is the logic of evolution, of change, of development, empiricism recognises them, but only unconsciously, so to speak.

The great achievements of British scientists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (e.g. Newton, Boyle) were arrived at because they were rigorously faithful to the notion that what is true is what we observe and record, time after time, through experimentation. Because of this method previous “common sense” views were challenged and overthrown. For example, a greater breadth and depth of observation of the natural world and an accurate recording could reveal to Darwin, despite his naive philosophical stance, that species could and did undergo transmutation.

Of course, this is not to suggest that “facts speak for themselves?.. Darwin himself had to make theoretical generalisations?for example to explain the mechanism of this transmutation?generalisations which could never arise simply out of observation.3 But his theory of evolution through natural selection did accommodate the observations, was materialist and provided a framework that best explained future observations.

Yet it is important to understand that the relative merits of this empiricism are restricted to the study of natural history and natural science. Unprejudiced recording of the physical, biological and chemical world can reveal the truth of the dialectic?constant motion and change. This is not the case in the study of politics, history and economics.

British people take a particular pride in their “common sense?. This trait of the national culture is, as Trotsky noted, a result of the early victory of the British bourgeoisie and the growth of capitalism over several centuries with an accompanying reduction in the influence and power of the church, both in the realm of ideas and in social and economic life.

This led to the adoption of a crude materialism, adequate for practical business and the natural sciences. Their very success with this method, led British bourgeois thinkers to view all attempts at systematic and consistent thought, all attempts at theoretical generalisations, whether idealist or materialist, as a waste of energy. They adopted a sceptical, agnostic attitude to such approaches.
This finds its popular expression in the frequent identification of the theoretical with the impractical. People prefer to use their common sense. But what is common sense? Basically, years of practical experience in some field or other—in the factory or in the family for example—has given rise to certain established truths about the way the world operates.

It is common sense not to put your hand in the fire, since experience shows that it hurts. For many good cooks, it is common sense which dictates how to combine a variety of ingredients and in what proportions to make a cake.

Common sense ideas do not arise because people agree one day that they will do something in a particular way. No, they are the result of doing things in a particular way for so long that they are taken for granted, with certain modifications occasionally being made in the light of experience.

Common sense also operates on the basis of formal logic, perfectly adequate for the many occasions where we need to treat the world as, in practice, unchanging. It is common sense because it worked in the past; if it worked in the past, and works equally well today, then things must change very little.

A shop assistant selling vegetables will work for month after month with the idea that a pound of fruit is exactly the same weight each time it is served to a different customer. Proof of this proposition is that the customers act as if it is true. But further investigation would reveal that each one pound does not in fact equal one pound. Each successive customer is likely to receive a fraction above or below one pound. Nor are the fruit the same each time and they will vary in size, quality and freshness.

So the idea that one pound of strawberries is equal to any other is only an approximate truth. Even the idea that any one strawberry is equal to itself is flawed since each piece of fruit is proceeding from ripeness to rottenness. At a certain point, the decay will make the fruit unusable. But, for everyday use, a pound of strawberries is a pound of strawberries.

Hence, formal logic is far from useless. Indeed, it is essential. But it has limits to its usefulness. Dialectical logic, which stresses that matter and processes are in a constant state of evolution, is superior in understanding more difficult and complex processes and, faced with them, gives a richer, fuller truth. As Trotsky noted:

-Dialectical thinking is related to vulgar thinking in the same way that a motion picture is related to a still photograph. The motion picture does not outlaw the still photograph but combines a series of them . . .?

It was the German philosopher, Hegel, who first systematised, into general and abstract laws, the properties of dialectical thought. He did this on the basis of an encyclopaedic knowledge of the natural sciences of his time, the arts, history and, of course, philosophy.

Out of his studies, he summarised the laws of the dialectic. Hegel was an idealist but this did not invalidate the insights he made into these laws. At the very core of dialectical logic, lies the recognition that all natural and social phenomena consist of contradictory parts.

Contradiction is the co-existence of conflicting elements within a whole. The unity of these opposed elements, for example, capital and wage labour, within the capitalist system, provides the essential dynamic for the movement and conflict. Each of the polar opposites within such conflicts is necessary to the existence of the other. But the conflict produces development, change: the introduction of new machinery that increases the productivity of labour, for example. Such adaptations and changes do not simply go on without affecting the totality, the nature of the natural object or social formation.
Another dialectical law concerns the development of quantitative changes into a qualitative transformation. The temperature of a pan of water increases quantitatively as it is heated. When the temperature reaches 100°C, however, the quantitative increase in energy effects a change in the quality of the water. At a particular moment of qualitative transformation, the water becomes vaporised.

Related to this, is the antagonism between content and form. What was initially a form which could accurately express a certain content becomes, by further development of that content, unable to accommodate it and stands in contradiction to it.

This indicates for example, that a process of change can proceed within a recognisable form gradually and incrementally but only until a point is reached where the form can no longer accommodate the changes. At this point the object is transformed.

An example of this is, as Engels noted, the fact that capitalism’s competitive compulsion to an “unheard of development of productive forces”, runs into contradiction with the relations of production, capitalist ownership: “The mode of production rises in rebellion against the form of exchange.”

Connected with this understanding of change is the concept of negation and transcendence. All motion tends to transform objects into their opposite. But such negation does not simply obliterate what it negates, it also combines with and preserves it. Thus, it does not simply resolve the contradiction at the heart of the movement but also preserves it by transferring it onto a higher level.

Primitive classless society was internally highly cohesive, a function of its closeness to simple subsistence. The development of production, the growth of a surplus, the destruction and supercession of communal existence by a society convulsed by class conflict, was the price to be paid for humanity dominating nature. Under socialism, a product of this class struggle, this negation will be transcended: an even greater mastery over nature will be combined with a superior form of internal social cohesion and co-operation, through the reappearance of classless society at a higher level.

Some critics have said that this is a schema foisted onto reality, a variation of the religious myth of an original innocence, the fall and, finally, redemption. But Marxism does not analyse only forward movements in human history but also retreats. The Russian workers negated capitalism in 1917. The triumph of the Stalinist counter-revolution in the 1930s completed the destruction of the political rule of the workers’ council state, replacing it with a bureaucratic dictatorship.

The revolutionary political power of the proletariat was negated by the bureaucracy, acting in this as an agent of the world bourgeoisie. But the economic conquests of the Russian workers, the planned and statified means of production, were not simultaneously liquidated. An element, indeed the decisive element, in terms of identifying any state’s class character, the proletarian property relations, was preserved. A new phenomenon—the degenerated workers’ state—came into existence.

Trotsky knew that this was a temporary phenomenon whose contradictions would also have to be resolved. In the words of the Transitional Programme:

“Either the bureaucracy becoming ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie within the workers’ state will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back to capitalism; or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way to socialism.”

This prognosis is being totally confirmed, though belatedly and, so far, in its negative variant. But, more importantly, it guided Trotsky to a revolutionary strategy which combined intransigent revolutionary struggle to destroy the Stalinist dictatorship with the defence of the USSR and the struggle to preserve and
democratically transform the planned economy.

This analysis was only possible on the basis of an understanding and utilisation of the laws of the dialectic. Those within the Trotskyist movement who did not, such as James Burnham and Max Shachtman, not only did not and could not understand Stalinism, but ended up on the wrong side of the barricades. Likewise, today, anyone who rejects or misunderstands the dialectical method is likely to meet disaster in analysing the restoration process in the USSR and the other degenerate workers’ states.

Before we examine how these laws of the dialectical evolution of matter operate in the realm of cognition, of thinking matter, we have to establish clearly that we are materialists. All practical everyday life and all serious natural science is conducted on the basis that the world and the universe exist independently of, and prior to, human consciousness of them.

Human thinking has to work on and with impressions made by this objectively existing world upon our senses and the extensions of those senses that we have created in the form of tools and scientific instruments. Our thinking, including the use of formal and dialectical logic, is not a flight of fancy, a piece of subjectivism that we impose on the world. Some of Trotsky’s supporters nevertheless thought this was the case.

Max Eastman, Trotsky’s literary agent from the 1920s onwards, thought that dialectical thinking was metaphysical nonsense. The laws of the dialectic did not exist and were merely the human mind imposing fanciful constructions upon the external world.

He claimed to recognise the value of believing in dialectical thinking, in that it gave Lenin a tremendous flexibility in thinking, enabling him to avoid dogmatism in the face of new facts. But that was all. For Eastman, dialectics was a useful device, but was not lawfully connected to understanding the real world of politics.

Even leaders of the Fourth International in the 1930s were equally scathing about the ‘scientific’ value of dialectical logic. In the Socialist Workers Party (USA), Max Shachtman was a sceptic while James Burnham was an open opponent of the dialectic. He believed that there was no connection between politics and ‘philosophy’. Political positions had to be judged in their own terms without reference to ‘dialectical logic’.

Trotsky’s answer was to insist that dialectical logic was no arbitrary construction. On the contrary:

We call our dialectic materialist since its roots are neither in heaven nor in the depth of our ‘free will’ but in objective reality, in nature.

The independent existence and primacy of that world to our thoughts is a real premise for Marxists. We reject playing with words as in the objection: ‘How do we know that the real world exists independently of us if we can only know it through our senses?’

Scientific investigation proves the prior existence of matter before our own existence and, in this sense, we and our minds (which are a form of matter) are related to the external world as a part is to the whole. We are a specialised extension of this world; the laws that govern its operation govern us, though in particular forms that derive from the specialised character of this type of matter.

Since mind is a form of matter, it must have arisen as an adaptation in animal evolution selected and developed functionally. Otherwise, why did it arise as a separate form of matter? Trotsky recognised this when he noted that ‘Dialectical cognition is not identical with the dialectic of nature. Consciousness is a
quite original part of nature, possessing peculiarities and regularities that are completely absent in the remaining part of nature. 7

How can we maintain the idea of the primacy of the objective real world “out there” and yet give a creative place to thought? First, we have to grasp the multi-layered nature of consciousness:

“Consciousness is a generic term for the relationship of animals (including men) with the external world that is brought about by the activity of the brain; it includes sensations, the elementary form of consciousness, perception—the fitting together of sensations into a complex but concrete representation of the complex relationships of complex objects—and ideas, which reproduce the properties and relations of things in abstraction and which are . . . specifically human. Thought is the name we give to this higher form of consciousness, where ideas are produced and manipulated.” 8

The relationship between different aspects of consciousness obeys certain rules.9 Thus, sensations, perceptions and thought all reflect objective reality, but differently and with increasing precision. Concepts (the product of thought) are both closer to the objective reality that they reflect and, at the same time, more remote from it than sensations; they are closer in the sense that they more accurately reflect its real nature (its movement, the essential inner relationships) but they are more remote in that they are less direct, more mediated, than sensations because thoughts pass through the filter of language.

But thought is active not passive. Thought is a reflection upon reality not simply a reflection of it. Thought takes the raw material of its own more primitive forms of consciousness (and those of others), including other concepts, and produces novel ones, selecting, mixing, projecting future solutions.

Part of this process of thought is knowing how to think according to the material nature of the subject matter under study and the situation we find ourselves in. When will formal logic do and when is it insufficient?

The logic of thinking lies in this power of abstraction and concretisation, of analysis and synthesis; moving away from and back to sensuous reality, comprehending the connections and relationships of matter.

But this method is not idealistic since it must proceed from an exhaustive study of the facts of the matter, their interconnections, their development. Then and only then will it reveal the inner laws of the real matter and not be an imposition on them. As Isaac Deutscher once said:

“Dialectics is indeed the grammar of Marxist thinking. But just as one shows ones mastery of grammar not in reciting its rules, but in living speech, so one shows ones grasp of dialectics not in mulling over its formulae, but in coming to grips with specific, large and vital issues in history and contemporary affairs.” 10

Trotsky, in a different context, said much the same in 1926 when he cautioned his party cadre to avoid “communist swagger” which occurs when cadre content themselves with “reciting the rules” of dialectics and fail to study the material under discussion:

“You cannot foist dialectics on facts, but must derive it from the facts, from their nature and their development . . . To apply dialectic materialism to new areas of knowledge is possible only having mastered them from within.” 11

Naturally, even then, having done all this, a revolutionary fighter is only approaching the most important step. The truth of the process of cognition is not in interpretation but in practice, in verification, through knowing where in the process of the class struggle to insert the revolutionary party to make an effect. Hence, our insights must find a suitable form for making this influence felt. Given the task, and the
audience we are trying to reach, what is appropriate; theory, propaganda, agitation?

Both Lenin and Trotsky consciously formulated many of their theoretical and practical insights guided by the laws of dialectical thought. The theory of uneven and combined development is nothing other than the specific application by Trotsky of the idea of the contradictory unity of the world economy. It starts from this premise and is applied to the totality of late nineteenth century Russia. Not identity but unity of contradictory and diverse aspects.

Lenin hammered away time and again that in politics one should always be guided by one principle in particular?perhaps, for Lenin, the most important law of dialectical thinking?the notion that the truth is always concrete:

?Marxist thought is concrete, that is it looks upon all the decisive factors in any given question, not only from the point of view of their reciprocal relations, but also from that of their development. It never dissolves the momentary situation within the general perspective, but by means of the general perspective makes possible an analysis of the momentary situation in all its peculiarities. Politics has as its point of departure precisely this sort of concrete analysis. Opportunist and sectarian thought have this feature in common: they extract from the complexity of circumstances and forces one or two factors that appear to them to be the most important (and sometimes are to be sure), isolate them from the complex reality, and attribute to them unlimited and unrestricted powers.? 12

Here, concrete means not the immediately sensuous and visible, something available to our senses to see or touch. Rather, concrete means here a combination of diverse abstractions. An abstraction is a one-sided truth viewed in isolation. In analysis, these abstractions must be given their due and consistent weight in order to arrive at a combination that results in concrete analysis. Trotsky?s writings are littered with examples.

Trotsky writes of the revolutionary trade union leader who conducts his policy only on the basis of the idea that trade unions are organs of bourgeois incorporation into the state in an epoch of capitalist decay. This is one abstraction and, as such, a partial truth. Another is that trade unions are organs of elementary (economic) class struggle, another abstract and partial truth. We could add more and more to our definition, that they are schools of socialism etc.

But the point is what combination of these truths and what weight should we attach to them at any given conjuncture? This is decisive for determining practice. A Marxist who today conducted policy based solely upon the conservative nature of trade unions, their totally bourgeois character would?under revolutionary sounding phrases?be guilty, in fact, of reactionary politics.13

Lenin himself had cause to criticise Bukharin among others for their failure to follow the strictures of this law. In 1920, in Russia, there was a debate in the RCP between Trotsky and Zinoviev on the role of trade unions in Russia. The latter said that they were a school for socialism and the former that they were an apparatus of the state under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Bukharin, falsely claiming that in avoiding the ?one-sidedness? of either Zinoviev or Trotsky he was being dialectical in his approach, intervened to say that the trade unions were . . . both. Lenin disagreed:

?The gist of his theoretical mistake in this case is substitution of eclecticism for the dialectical interplay of politics and economics (which we find in Marxism). His theoretical attitude is: ?on the one hand, on the other?, ?the one and the other?, That is eclecticism. Dialectics requires an all round consideration of relationships in their concrete development but not a patchwork of bits and pieces.? 14
Lenin said that Bukharin did not recognise the centrality of the law that the ?truth is always concrete?. This meant that Bukharin stopped at abstractions such as these and did not examine the problem in all its details; hence he arrived at mere eclecticism. He presented no independent analysis of the matter and, therefore, no evidence as to why anyone should treat the first, second, third or fourth aspect of the object as decisive in this situation.

If truth is concrete it must be verified in practice, in the light of experience and be corrected in the light of developments in the real world. Here, the law of the transformation of quantity into quality is decisive. For Trotsky, it was ?probably the most important law?. Certainly, this is the case for a revolutionary practice.

Trotsky was forced on many occasions to re-elaborate his concepts and ideas to meet changing realities. He says that concepts are necessary but, at the same time as they capture an aspect of the truth, they kill it, since the truth is really a process of change and development.

A concept can be said to analyse a changing reality but, at a certain point, that reality bursts the bounds of the concept?s adequacy; quantity turns into quality and we must re-elaborate, or replace, the concept. We must retain what remains valid and reject what does not. We must develop a new and richer concept.

?Historically humanity forms its ?conceptions??the basic elements of thinking?on the foundations of experience, which is always incomplete, partial, one-sided. It includes in ?the concept? those features of a living, forever changing process, which are important and significant for it at a given moment. Its future experience is at first enriched (quantitatively) and then outgrows the closed concept, that is, in practice negates it, by virtue of this necessitating a theoretical negation. But the negation does not signify a turning back to tabula rasa. Reason already possesses: a) the concept and b) the recognition of its unsoundness. This recognition is tantamount to the necessity to construct a new concept, and then it is inevitably revealed that the negation was not absolute, that it affected only certain features of the first concept. The new concept, therefore, has, by necessity, a synthetic character: into it enter those elements of the initial concept which were able to withstand the trial by experience, plus those new elements of experience which led to the negation of the initial concept. 15

As we have seen, the most important single development that Trotsky had to analyse was the degeneration of the Russian Revolution under Stalin?s reign. The very idea of Russia being any kind of a workers? state at all came under repeated challenge from within and without the ranks of the Fourth International in the 1930s as the enormity of the crimes of Stalin against the working class inside the USSR became apparent.

Those inclined to empirical and normative thinking could only operate with the idea that a workers? state must include all the following features: workers? management of production, progress towards the eradication of inequalities, progressive withering away of the state, sovereign rule by the soviets. In the absence of any of these the definition could no longer hold.

Trotsky started differently. He first of all argued that the fundamental aspect of the definition of the class nature of the USSR must, for a Marxist, start from the nature of the property relations. Despite the fact that the working class under Stalin did not plan production directly and democratically, capitalism had been completely eradicated. Hence, Trotsky started with a scientific analysis that began with an understanding of what it was that he was studying?the class nature of societies and states.

For quantitative changes to pass into qualitative ones, there would have to be qualitative change in this aspect, the property relations, of the USSR. A degeneration of the political superstructure, however important and grotesque, could prepare the way for this transformation but should not be identified with the
transformation itself. Thus, Trotsky's method was historical, charting the stages of a process of change and giving all the specific contradictions their due weight.

The post war history of the Fourth International was plagued by the inability to approach the task of conceptual re-elaboration in a similar manner. After the war the Fourth International was ultimately incapable of analysing correctly the changes that were taking pace in world Stalinism. Its expansion into Eastern Europe after 1944, and the subsequent conflicts between nationally powerful Stalinists, like Tito and Mao, and Stalin himself, disoriented the Fourth International.

Before the Second World War, it was an adequate, approximate truth to define Stalinism as ?subservience to, or carrying out the political interests of the Kremlin?. But, after the war, this was inadequate to a new situation where new degenerate workers? states had come into existence (with the aid of Moscow). Their very existence demanded that Trotskyists broaden the definition of Stalinism to escape from the limitations of too narrow a definition which identified it with the interests of the bureaucracy of the USSR.

In fact, by failing to do this, and by insisting on the pre-war, narrow definition, the way was paved for the false conception that Tito had ceased to be a Stalinist when he clashed with the Kremlin after 1948. And this was despite the fact that, as early as 1928, Trotsky had laid the basis for a re-elaborated, broader definition of Stalinism when he predicted the ultimate social patriotic degeneration of Stalinism, that is along national lines.

Similarly, only a concrete dialectical analysis could recognise that, whereas before October 1917 workers? states could only come into existence through the smashing of bourgeois state power by sovereign workers? councils, the triumph and subsequent degeneration of the Russian Revolution changed (i.e. extended) the ways in which workers? states (even if degenerate from birth) could come about. Bureaucratic social overturns could take place, abolishing capitalism after having first subordinated the working class to a bureaucratic dictatorship.

Again, for many in the Fourth International after the war it was an essential (i.e. not just a historically grounded) truth that the working class had to participate independently in the process of overthrowing capitalism or it could not happen. Thus past truths, embodied in classic formulations, tripped up and confused those who could not use the method of Marxism but only mechanically follow its doctrine.

The notion that the bureaucracy could overthrow capitalism (a revolutionary act) whilst blocking the transition to socialism, which certainly does depend on independent class action (a counter-revolutionary act) could only be derived from a concrete and dialectical analysis.

Since 1989, the Trotskyist movement has been faced with equally important challenges of conceptual elaboration. Trotskyists inherited the idea from Trotsky that capitalism could not be restored inside the USSR, or any workers? state, without a civil war. It was impossible to ?wind the film of reformism backwards?, as Trotsky said.

But it is clear that this idea was based on a premise, namely that the working class in these countries would defend the existence of post-capitalist property. This was especially true inside the USSR where the working class had made the revolution and experienced the fruits of this before the degeneration.

However, this truth too was historically grounded, like all others. Once the conditions which supported it changed then it was going to be falsified. The fact is that the effects of decades of political oppression and stagnation of the economy at the hands of the Stalinists, plus the fact that, in Eastern Europe, the abolition of capitalism was seen as an imposition from without, meant that the working class did not experience the
post-capitalist property as its own, to be defended on the barricades.

On the contrary, the masses were unable to distinguish between the source of their oppression (the Stalinist caste) and the property relations. Change and development, even here, oblige us to reconsider our inherited ideas, to keep what is positive within them and discard what can not be sustained. The next years will be full of challenges to Marxism. As a truly scientific theory, and a weapon in the class struggle, it is hardly surprising that the class enemy tries repeatedly to discredit it.

Many worshippers of the power of the Soviet, Chinese or Cuban bureaucracies will, with the final collapse of their gods, regard Marxism itself as redundant; still others will retreat into a sect-like affirmation that inherited doctrine alone is sufficient. Both will prove incapable of theoretical refinement, fearful of the challenge, lest they only produce revisions. Genuine Marxism will renew its programme, gain new adherents and press on to new victories for our class. 

NOTES
2 Ibid, p54
3 In a letter to Alfred Wallace, Darwin himself said ?. . . without speculation there is no good and original observation?. , quoted in Darwin, A Desmond and J Moore, London 1992. p463
4 L Trotsky, The Transitional Programme, New York 1977, p142
5 ?But there is no sense at all in which dialectics . . . is fundamental in politics, none at all. An opinion on dialectics is no more fundamental for politics than an opinion on non-Euclidian geometry or relativity physics.? J Burnham, ?Science and style?, in In Defence of Marxism, op cit, p196
6 L Trotsky, In Defence of Marxism, op cit, p51
9 ?Consciousness splits nature into fixed categories and in this way enters into contradiction with reality. Dialectics overcomes this contradiction?gradually and piecemeal?bringing consciousness nearer to reality.? Trotsky calls the relationship between consciousness (i.e. cognition) and nature as ?the most important problem of dialectical philosophy?, Notebooks, op cit, p101
10 I Deutcher, ?Discovering Das Kapital?, in Marxism in Our Time, Berkeley 1971, p261-62
11 L Trotsky, Problems of Everyday Life, p263. Also: ?The dialectic does not liberate the investigator from painstaking study of the facts, quite the contrary: it requires it. But in return it gives investigative thought elasticity, helps it cope with ossified prejudices, arms it with invaluable analogies, and educates it a spirit of daring, grounded in circumspection.? in Notebooks, op cit, p92
13 ?Dialectical thinking gives to concepts, by means of closer approximation, corrections, concretisations, a richness of content and flexibility; I would even say a succulence which to a certain extent brings them close to living phenomena. Not capitalism in general, but a given capitalism at a given stage of development. Not a workers? state in general, but a given workers? state in a backward country in an imperialist encirclement?. , L Trotsky, In Defence of Marxism, op cit, p50
15 Notebooks, op cit, p101

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