

Trotskyism in the Sixties

Review of Memoir of Leading U.S.Trotskyist

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This is an autobiographical account by a leader of U.S. Trotskyism during the tumultuous period of the Sixties (a period which really runs from the mid-Fifties to the mid-Seventies). He was a leader of the main U.S. Trotskyist group, which was then the Socialist Workers Party (SWP—no relation to the present-day British Trotskyist group of the same name) and of its youth organization, the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA). Barry Sheppard was a friend of other Trotskyist leaders, especially Peter Camejo. The Sixties were the last period of mass radicalization. Since we are now moving into a new period of mass radicalization, it is important to learn whatever we can from previous periods (including the even earlier Thirties). Hopefully we can at least limit our repetition of previous errors.

The two main forces of U.S. Sixties radicalization were the movement for Civil Rights (also called Black Liberation and/or Freedom Now) and the movement against the war in Vietnam. The SWP-YSA focused on the antiwar movement, particularly on college campuses.

During this period, many young people learned about the depth of U.S. racism and the reality of U.S. imperialism, as the U.S. state ruthlessly carried out a war of aggression against the Vietnamese (and Laotian and Cambodian) people. They were also educated in the weakness and cowardice of U.S. liberalism. The Democratic Party ran the U.S. government and carried out the war. The supposed left of the Democrats were unwilling to oppose it. The leaders of the AFL-CIO unions were viciously militarist. The liberal left wing of the unions was unwilling to oppose the AFL-CIO's national leadership. The traditional peace movement was split by the war, after years of accommodating to Cold War anti-communist politics. Even the leaders of the Black movement at first did not want to speak against the war and antagonize the U.S. government, even though M.L. King was supposedly a pacifist. Gradually they came to speak out.

Given the failures of the liberals, the antiwar movement was built by various radicals: Trotskyists, the Communists (pro-Moscow Stalinists with a reformist program), Maoists (pro-Beijing Stalinists who were subjectively revolutionary), radical pacifists, and assorted radicals such as the Yippies. There were only a few anarchists and anti-authoritarians, mostly among the radical pacifists—such as Paul Goodman. (Occasionally Sheppard mentions running into an anarchist or libertarian socialist.) This “saving remnant” of quarreling radicals was quite extreme compared to the mainstream of conventional politics, in a country where even “socialism” was a word on the Devil's tongue. (In those years, I personally went from being an anarchist-pacifist to becoming a left-Trotskyist in a group which eventually evolved into revolutionary anarchism.) Yet without these radical extremists there would not have been any antiwar movement.

Trotskyists in the Antiwar Movement

At first the SWP-YSA played a relatively positive role. It mostly participated in organizing massive twice-annual antiwar marches. These demonstrated the extent of opposition to the war (which is why they were called “demonstrations”). The extent of antiwar sentiment was demonstrated to the authorities, to the Vietnamese, and to U.S. citizens, especially to antiwar people who saw they were not alone. The government pretended to not care, but the demonstrations affected its war policies. For example, we now know that President Nixon refrained from bombing the North Vietnamese dikes or even using nuclear bombs (both of which were under consideration) out of concern for the antiwar response.

It fought for “nonexclusionism.” This was opposed to the liberals’ policy of keeping out Communists and revolutionaries, as they had in the Fifties. It was also opposed to the Communists’ policy of keeping out Trotskyists and others to their left, as they had in the Thirties. This did not prevent hard political disputes, but it meant that ideas were argued on their merits, rather than on the basis of who had raised them. (Today some anarchists try to keep leftists whose politics they dislike out of otherwise open meetings, which is an unfortunate revival of exclusionism.)

In alliance with the radical pacifists, the SWP fought for the antiwar program of immediate and unconditional withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam, often expressed as “Bring the Troops Home Now!” or just “Out Now!” The Communist Party, moderate pacifists, and social democrats called instead for “negotiations.” The Trotskyists and radical pacifists pointed out that President Lyndon Johnson also claimed to be for “negotiations,” even as he escalated the war (he blamed the Vietnamese nationalists for not negotiating). And that the slogan of negotiations accepted the assumption that the U.S. had legitimate interests in Vietnam.

The real issue was that the Communists, moderate pacifists, and reform socialists wanted a program which would permit them to continue to work with Democratic politicians. They did not want to break with the bourgeois politicians. In fact, such forces were pretty open in advocating participation in the Democratic Party.

But the SWP and YSA also did not advocate a clear-cut opposition to the Democrats and the liberals. They adopted a strategy of a “single-issue program” for the antiwar movement. That is, they fought for the demonstrations, rallies, and conferences to have one political point and one only, namely opposition to the war. They fought against even calling for opposition to racism as part of the program. Their argument was that only this way could the movement avoid conflicts over which multi-issue program to endorse.

What instead happened was that the debate in the movement became distorted. Instead of arguing “reform or revolution,” the debate became “single issue or multi-issue.” Revolutionaries and reformists were on both sides of the dispute; more precisely, the multi-issue stance was raised by Communists, Maoists, and left-Trotskyists. The radical pacifists split from the SWP and joined the other side. A great many subjective revolutionaries came to hate the SWP and Trotskyism, leading many toward Maoism.

In truth the SWP, similar to the CP, noted the absence of the liberals, and decided to take their place, in its own way. Instead of standing for its supposedly revolutionary politics, it chose to stand in for the liberals, to act for them. This may have made the movement broader, but it was less militant, less threatening to the war-waging state. The SWP invited moderate Democratic politicians onto the demonstration platforms —and then, when its own speakers spoke, failed to denounce the Democrats as supporters of imperialism. Sheppard reports his study of the Russian Revolution of 1917, and comments how the political tendencies which he read about there appeared in modern day guise. He does not see how his own party carried out the politics of the Mensheviks—taking the place of the bourgeois liberals, trying to push the capitalist politicians forward and trying not to drive them away by being too oppositional.

A part of this reformism was the lack of any working class activity on the part of the SWP. It is true, as Sheppard points out, that the level of working class activity was fairly low during this period, which was the ending days of the post-World War II economic boom. Yet, as polls showed, opposition to the war was actually higher in the working class than it was among college students and the rest of the middle class. But the antiwar movement made little effort to reach out to workers. While labor struggles were fairly low, they did exist (there are always labor struggles).

The grape pickers union, led by Cesar Chavez, was organizing. The National Guard which shot down students at Kent State had just previously been used against striking Teamsters. Especially by the Seventies, there was a massive upsurge of wildcat strikes (such as in the Post Office) and oppositional caucuses in established unions (such as DRUM). There was important union organizing in health care and public employment. These struggles were often led by African-American workers. For example, Martin Luther King was killed when he was in Memphis to support a union drive by mostly-Black sanitation workers. The Maoists, in particular, were able to sink roots in working class jobs and communities and to recruit workers. They could do this because, unlike the SWP, they made an effort to do it.

Sheppard details the history of his participation in the antiwar movement and in other SWP-YSA activities. Due to his prominent position, this generally covers most of what the party did in those years. However he does not discuss his political methodology. The closest he comes to this is when speaking in criticism of the people in the YSA who eventually formed the obnoxiously sectarian Spartacist League. He denounces "...the sectarian notion that the duty of revolutionists is always to oppose, from the left, whoever is leading a mass struggle at the moment...to focus on the differences one may have with these groups rather than on the good work that they do. The only alternatives that sectarians see are sideline criticisms or adaptation." (pp. 77-78)

But these are also the only alternatives he presents. From his perspective, either a radical group sees itself as uncritical cheerleaders for the movement or as hypercritical sectarians. Either the radical group tries to be the best builders of the movement, saying little or nothing to offend anyone to its right ("adaptation")...or it makes a program out of being obnoxious and irrelevant ("sideline criticisms"). The Trotskyist movement—like most of the radical left—has tended to vacillate between these two poles. Oddly enough, what once attracted my friends and myself to Trotskyism was especially Trotsky's effort to combine participation in mass struggles with being openly and honestly revolutionary—"saying what is," in Trotsky's phrase. To this end, he wrote extensively on the concepts of the "united front," "critical support," and "transitional demands." These were all attempts to integrate being openly revolutionary with being part of popular movements, ways of working together with people of varying views while raising the revolutionary banner and telling the truth to working people. (In my opinion, this methodology is compatible with revolutionary anarchism, if critically examined.) Sheppard mentions such concepts as transitional demands, but only as a way to justify a reformist practice, not as methods of being revolutionary within reform struggles such as an antiwar movement. (Political groupings which claimed to be revolutionary but which acted reformist were called "centrist" by Trotsky.)

The Cuban Revolution

The grossest example of the SWP's cheerleading was its reaction to the Castro's revolution. The SWP built on Trotsky's worst error, his belief that the Soviet Union under Stalin was a "workers' state," a "degenerated workers' state." He recognized that the Russian workers had absolutely no power but were oppressed and superexploited by a bureaucratic police state which was carrying out a counterrevolution. Nevertheless, Trotsky still claimed that this was a "dictatorship of the proletariat," that is, that the working class ruled. What made this so was the continued presence of government ownership of industry and supposed economic planning. (I leave aside my anarchist belief that the very concept of a "workers' state" is impossible nonsense.) To his dying day,

Trotsky believed that the bureaucracy could not be a state-capitalist ruling class because it had not broken up the collectivized property into stocks-and-bonds capitalism. Therefore the Soviet Union should be defended against Western imperialism. There should be a workers' "political revolution" to overthrow the bureaucracy, but not a "social revolution" to change the economic system, since it was supposedly already of a socialist-type.

For Trotsky the essential thing which made for a "workers' state" was not workers' rule but the centralized, nationalized, collectivized, property. This comes from a tendency within Marxism, which goes back through Lenin, through the earlier Second (Social Democratic) International, and to an aspect of Marx's Marxism. This defines socialism as centralized, planned, nationalized industry. It can be found in the Communist Manifesto. It was, and still is, a central difference between Marxism, even at its best, and anarchism. This is what defines Marxism, for all its insights, as authoritarian. The question here is not really about the nature of the deceased Soviet Union, but about THE MEANING OF SOCIALISM. What is our vision of a new society? Is it a centralized economy run by a centralized state led by a centralized party? Or is it a self-managed federation of collectivized communities and industries?

Trotsky was sure that the collectivized bureaucracy would collapse by the end of World War II. Instead it came through the war newly stabilized (it took the bureaucracy about 60 years before it decided to change the form of its capitalism). Then it expanded into Eastern Europe, while similar states were created in China and other parts of Asia. None of these European or Asian countries had had workers' revolutions—their (political) revolutions were either carried out by the Russian army or by peasant-based armies led by Stalinist-nationalist incipient bureaucrats. Their transformations were not led by a revolutionary working class party (which was important to Trotskyists). And the workers (and peasants) had the same lack of power, the same superexploitation, as in the Soviet Union. All of which the Trotskyists recognized. Yet the mainstream of the Trotskyist movement (the "Fourth International") decided that these too were "workers' states:" now "deformed workers' states." However, this raised a dilemma for the Trotskyists: if Stalinist and/or nationalist parties could create workers' states (in a third of Europe and China) then what was the need for the Trotskyist movement?

For a time, Sheppard was under the influence of an unorthodox Trotskyist tendency which rejected Trotsky's theory of the Soviet Union. This tendency was led by Max Shachtman and others, such as Hal Draper. They (correctly) regarded the bureaucracy as a new ruling class and (incorrectly I think) the Soviet Union as a new type of class society, "bureaucratic collectivism" (instead of state capitalism). It is not clear from the book just why Sheppard came to reject this theory, except that Shachtman was rapidly moving to the right at the time, into the Democratic Party and supporting U.S. imperialism in Vietnam and Cuba.

The issue came to a head with the Cuban revolution. Despite strike actions, the working class had not led the revolution nor did it control it. The leaders were a group of radical nationalists. First they set up a state which ruled a capitalist economy, presumably a bourgeois state. Then, under U.S. pressure, they nationalized virtually all of the economy, without changing the state. What had happened?

Sheppard writes, *"In October [1959]...Castro...said that the revolution would proceed to nationalize the Cuban and foreign capitalists...When this speech was reported on the nightly TV news, I was so excited that I immediately telephoned Peter Camejo, and told him that I thought that by this action Cuba had become a workers' state...This was a revolutionary workers' state based on the mobilization of the workers and peasants, not a degenerated one like the Soviet Union..."* (p. 52) So by

a speech, Castro had changed the class character of his state! Of course the speech was followed by actions, the nationalization of the economy. This was carried out by the same state which had ruled a capitalist economy and which the workers did not control. As Sheppard coyly notes, “...the revolution lacked as yet instruments of popular rule, such as the Soviets [councils] of the early Russian revolution.” (p. 60) Such instruments never did appear. Instead, as Sheppard writes, the workers and peasants were “mobilized” by the ruling party.

Sheppard describes how the SWP invented a new theory of the state. “*The SWP used the term ‘workers’ and farmers’ government’ ...[which was] a transitory stage: a stage in between a capitalist state and a workers’ state...*” (p. 140) This transitional and quasi-nonclass state was created to explain how an apparently bourgeois state could turn into a workers’ state in China and Cuba without a revolution in between, and conversely how an apparent “workers’ state” in Algeria could turn back into a bourgeois state without much basic change. That it completely junked the Marxist theory of the state (the state is the instrument of a ruling class) was not a problem for these Trotskyists. (These days it is often anarchists who preserve the best insights of Marx's Marxism.)

While continuing to regard the Soviet Union as a “workers’ state,” Trotsky, in his last years, came to advocate a revolution to replace the bureaucracy by radically-democratic councils of workers and peasants. They should, he wrote, be multiparty, multi-tendency. Faced with the Cuban revolution, the mainstream (“orthodox”) Trotskyists could not just accept it as creating a radical-nationalist and anti-imperialist bourgeois state (which it did), similar in structure to the Soviet Union. Instead they declared it to be a “healthy” and revolutionary “workers’ state,” even if it was a one-party party-state ruled by a one-man dictatorship! Thus they abandoned all that was liberatory in Trotskyism and accepted all that was reactionary.

Trotskyism Now

As Sheppard writes, the radicalization of the Sixties had many positive effects. The Vietnam war was ended with a U.S. defeat, which helped oppressed people throughout the world. People became much more critical of the U.S. government and much less willing to support foreign wars (the “Vietnam Syndrome”). African-Americans remain on the bottom of society, yet legal racial segregation was abolished, antidiscrimination laws were passed and affirmative action instituted. Attitudes toward racism have changed. There was a general expansion of democratic rights, especially for women and also for Gays and Lesbians. A consciousness of ecological issues began. Labor unions were widely established in hospitals and public employment. There was a loosening of sexual rules and other rigid moral codes.

Yet capitalism remains and therefore all these gains are vulnerable to being reversed. Right now they are all under attack by a right-wing backlash. Nothing can be said to have been solved. Most important was the failure to build a lasting revolutionary organization. A large part of the blame for this goes to the SWP of Sheppard’s day

Sheppard begins the book by claiming that the present-day SWP, which he has quit, is “...an inconsequential ideological sect, one which cares little about or is even hostile to the struggles that inspire [today’s young] activists.” (p. 8) He says he will discuss how this happened to the SWP in his next volume. But even so, there is little in his book which suggests an insight to the decline of

the SWP. He mentions some mistakes (such as expelling members for being Gay), policies which were eventually changed.

But he does not look to the problem of the SWP's pro-Stalinism. In fact the SWP came to abandon its identification with Trotskyism and to increase its dedication to Castroism (a left variety of Stalinism). This was a logical development, considering that Stalinism had supposedly overthrown capitalism in a third of Europe and much of Asia, while Trotskyism had not collectivized a candy store. Then the Soviet Union imploded, Eastern Europe broke free, and China revived stocks-and-bonds traditional capitalism. Even Cuba is building casinos and tourist attractions (with an increase in prostitution) in order to survive. As a result, Marxism has been greatly discredited, especially the Marxism which identifies with the statist regimes. The SWP followed its theory to its logical outcome, only to be disoriented by the results.

The collapse of much of Marxism has led to an increased interest in anarchism, the other revolutionary tradition. However, Trotskyism continues, mostly in the expansion of a different wing of the Trotskyist movement. This wing has rejected Trotsky's theory of the degenerated workers' state, instead regarding the bureaucracy as a new ruling class. Either it regards the old Soviet Union as "bureaucratic collectivist" or as some version of state capitalism. This tendency includes the Socialist Workers' Party of Britain and, in the U.S., the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and also Solidarity (the organizational disputes among these groupings is beyond our scope here).

Unfortunately these groupings continue the same basic errors of the old, "orthodox," Trotskyists. (At a recent New York City conference of the ISO, they had a workshop on Sheppard's book.) They carry out the same centrist vacillations and capitulation to the right. For example, the ISO has supported Ralph Nader's presidential campaign, despite his clear endorsement of capitalism, his willingness to support continued foreign troops in Iraq, and his racist position on immigration. (Incidentally, Sheppard's friend Peter Camejo has also left the SWP and recently ran as Nader's vice presidential candidate!) While they reject the theory of the degenerated workers' state, they endorse Lenin and Trotsky's approach to the Russian revolution and the years afterwards, when a one-party dictatorship was set up, laying the groundwork for Stalin's regime. This is rooted in these Trotskyists' continued belief in socialism as a centralized, planned, nationalized economy run by (what they call) a "workers' state."

These Trotskyists are part of the present movement. They must be worked with in a comradely way wherever possible. Since no one knows all the answers, it is worth being in dialogue with them. Yet their program continues to have certain known limitations which anarchists must be aware of and which we must warn others about.

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