Trotskyism and the New Left

Madeleine Davis

John Kelly's excellent study argues that while the British Trotskyist groups have been extremely unsuccessful in fulfilling their stated aims, principally building a mass revolutionary party, their main impact has come through involvement in wider social or political movements. This involvement has taken forms that have varied at different times and between the groups, from entryism within the Labour Party, to acting as junior partners in broader social movements in which Trotskyists might be competing for influence with other groups, to helping create and sustain movements in which they acquire a dominant influence, and finally to the creation of 'front' organisations exclusively controlled by a specific Trotskyist group. A related set of arguments made in relation to this Trotskyist involvement with social movements is that any success within the latter has not translated into membership gain or electoral success, has tended to be achieved at the costs of downplaying doctrine, and that these movements have often been a bridge out of, as well as into, Trotskyism.

Although not itself 'qualifying' as a social movement in quite the same sense as those the book discusses, I would argue that the post-1956 British New Left has also been to some extent a vector for Trotskyist influence, as well as a competitor to it in terms of acting as an alternative, non-party, pole of attraction for Marxists and socialists. The book touches on this relationship when discussing the intellectual achievements of the Trotskyist movement, mentioning Perry Anderson's sometime Trotskyist leanings in particular and the role of *New Left Review* (*NLR*) under his editorship. It seems to me that building on and extending that brief insight into Trotskyism's relationship to New Leftism might also be relevant to the analysis in other areas.

It is important to be clear that by New Leftism I mean not only the intellectual production of the main journals and key figures, but also a diffuse current of activism that, while intermittent and taking no firm organisational shape, was more persistent and significant than is usually recognised.[1] The relationship between Trotskyism and New Leftism has been complex and variable, not least because neither strand is itself

homogeneous. Clearly, the ideological differences within New Leftism, which neither achieved nor sought full ideological cohesion nor attempted to impose any kind of 'line' on those who identified with it, are certainly larger than those within the Trotskyist movement, notwithstanding the latter's fissiparousness. At a general level, we may say that this relationship has been one of considerable animosity but also of considerable overlap. In an obvious sense, New Leftism and Trotskyism in Britain have operated in the same basic political space – a space neither social democratic nor Stalinist. Some of the most cogent and persistent left critique of the intellectual New Left has come from Trotskyist quarters, but at the same time there has been considerable traffic between the two strands. At certain points we can even speak of a Trotskyist section of the New Left (or a New Left section of Trotskyism?), with the closest relationship perhaps being at the point when several editors of *NLR* were active members of the International Marxist Group.

In a longer perspective, however, what has demarcated the New Left fairly sharply at most times from the Trotskyist groups has been its deliberate avoidance of those tendencies of doctrinairism and its associated sectarian hostilities noted by Kelly as key shortcomings, as well as its rejection of most forms of organisational and ideological discipline. It has been something of a staple of Trotskyist critique of New Leftists, that in doing this they at the same time consigned themselves to political irrelevance, a talking shop for intellectuals which, lacking any vehicle for the translation of ideas into effective practice, inevitably falls into some variant of 'left-reformism'. Such criticism, however, risks misunderstanding the nature of New Left and largely ignores its self-conception as engaged in an expansive and expressive form of cultural politics for which William Morris and Gramsci, rather than Lenin and Trotsky, are key sources.

Moments of engagement

At the inception of the New Left in 1956, Edward Thompson described Trotskyism as an anti-Stalinism that nevertheless carried over 'the same false conceptual framework and attitudes—the same economic behaviourism, cult of the elite, moral nihilism …'[2] His failure to engage with the longstanding Trotskyist critique of Stalinism has sometimes been noted as a source of weakness of his ideas about socialist humanism. The incompleteness of his and John Saville's break with Stalinism, is also a fairly well worn theme in Trotskyist commentary on New Leftism.[3] There is certainly something in these critiques, but at the same time, it seems clear

that in the particular context of the immediate post 1956 moment respectful engagement was unlikely.

The moment of exodus from the CPGB helped produce the New Left but was also an opportunity that British Trotskyists were keen to exploit. At the turn of 1956-7 a loose movement calling itself Socialist Forum organised conferences, meetings and a journal 'Forum' (edited by Michael Segal and Royden Harrison) with the idea of generating space and ideas for the ex-CP left to regroup. The Forum movement hosted interactions between those who would go on to be active in the New Left and some of those, like Peter Fryer, the *Daily Worker* correspondent whose reports on the Hungarian uprising had been suppressed by the party, who had or would join Trotskyist organisations. The most successful recruiter in this general ferment was Gerry Healy's Club, who with Fryer produced the Newsletter in 1957, before renaming the organisation the Socialist Labour League (SLL) in 1959 (at around the point Fryer left). Early New Left hostility to Trotskyism was in part a carry-over of the routine and vituperative anti-Trotskyism of the Stalin era, but it was also shaped by the particular characteristics of Healy and his apparatus. Thompson advised Lawrence Daly, the ex-CP miners' leader who stood in the 1959 general election as an independent candidate for his *Reasoner*-inspired Fife Socialist League, strongly against accepting money and support from Healy's group when it was apparently offered with 'no strings attached'. Healy's group, said Thompson, 'feels no loyalty to the movements with which they associate or with the working people', 'hate the CP more than capitalism' and espoused an industrial strategy of 'simple bull at a gate militancy'. He warned, 'if you let the Healy-type organisation into your mining villages, you will look forward to ten years of war: CP and Trot will be tearing the union apart'.[4]

Aside from a few skirmishes with the SLL, the published *New Reasoner* evinced little interest in Trotskyism. However, there was cordial private correspondence between Thompson and Raymond Challinor about the significance of Trotsky's writings,[5] and within the New Left, including among the group that produced *Universities and Left Review*, there was some interest in the work of Trotsky biographer Isaac Deutscher. At this moment of engagement, then, it seems that it was the Healyites rather than Trotskyism per se that aroused the strongest animosity within the New Left.

The relative diversification of Trotskyism that took place at the turn of the decade into the 1960s produced some more productive engagements. Important contributions were made within the New Left by people

associated with one or other of the Trotskyist groups, and there were many examples of productive joint working around specific initiatives and in the broader political activities in which the New Left was involved (it should though be noted that since the organisational structure of the New Left was extremely diffuse and indeterminate, such joint working would have been difficult to prevent, and assessing its effects is also somewhat difficult).

There were, for example, close relations between the *New Reasoner* group and the Nottingham-based circle around Ken Coates that would go on to form the International Group and later the IMG. In the mid-1960s, following the decline of the network of New Left clubs, Ralph Miliband, Coates and Tony Topham collaborated in establishing Centres for Socialist Education, aimed at labour movement activists, which morphed gradually into the Institute for Workers' Control (IWC) from 1968 onwards. Trade union and worker education and industrial democracy were thus areas where New Leftists and Trotskyists worked together, as of course was the better known Vietnam Solidarity Campaign.

In relation to the International Socialists/Socialist Workers Party (IS/SWP) strand, Peter Sedgwick was a contemporary and friend of Raphael Samuel, and active in the Oxford Socialist Club that produced *Universities and Left Review*. The two maintained friendly and productive relations during the period of Sedgwick's involvement in the Socialist Review Group and then the IS from 1962. Sedgwick, though remaining personally close to several prominent New Leftists, would become much more critical of the direction taken by *NLR* under Anderson – indeed the idea of 'two New Lefts' separated by that transition owes much to a piece of his with that title, and to its splendidly caustic depiction of the new *NLR* team as 'an olympian autogestion of roving postgraduates'.[6] Sedgwick also wrote a savage but very funny parody of the early Andersonian style as 'Pseud Left Review'.[7]

However, by the later 1960s Anderson himself and *NLR* had developed what Tom Nairn once described to me as their own brand of 'ethereal Trotskyism' that for a time (1968 through to the late 1970s) influenced the positions of *NLR* quite heavily.[8] Though *NLR* never described itself as a Trotskyist journal nor threw in its lot with the International Marxist Group (IMG), several of its key editors, including Robin Blackburn and Tariq Ali, were members. Indeed, the extent of the influence of Trotskyism became a major bone of contention within *NLR*: several of the editorial splits and mass resignations that occurred at various times were related to this, though not always in a direct way.

Some of those disagreements replayed an earlier split on the editorial board of the *Black Dwarf*. Founded in 1968 by a group that included Clive Goodwin, Tariq Ali, Christopher Logue, Fred Halliday, Sheila Rowbotham and Anthony Barnett, this originally declared itself to be a 'non-sectarian' paper, attempting to articulate a revolutionary socialist perspective without deference to party lines or doctrinal orthodoxies. However, this model ended abruptly when the IMG-linked editors including Tariq Ali secured alternative funding and decamped to found *Red Mole* as an official IMG paper. Some of those left behind, including Halliday and Barnett, went on to produce *7 Days* from 1971-2.[9]

Researching *7 Days*, I recently came across a memo written by Fred Halliday when he was editing the paper. Headed 'why we should not call ourselves non-sectarian', it shows very interestingly the difficulty the non-Trotskyist revolutionary Marxist end of the New Left had in delineating their own perspective clearly but also why they thought it was important to do so. Halliday: 'it is all very well to scoff at CP/IS/SLL/IMG et al, but they exist and have a practice. Until we do too, and are strong we have nothing to offer their members in this respect'. He continued:

> Also non-sectarian suggests a lack of clear line. If we reply that we do have a line then we are open to the criticism of saying that while our line is principled everyone else's is sectarian. We have to argue that we do have a clear line, but that it is distinguished from sectarian positions not by being less clear, but by allowing more disagreement and by being more responsive to new political and cultural developments … [10]

'Non-sectarian', as Halliday pointed out, was a category that was negatively defined but failed to resolve three issues that persistently confounded the New Left – relations with other groups, the question of how to arrive at principled positions, and organisation.

It was Ralph Miliband who most persistently raised the problem of political organisation within the New Left. Convinced that party organisation was ultimately necessary for socialist advance, and cognisant of the limitations of 'labourism', Miliband rejected the revolutionism of the smaller left parties as of limited relevance to British conditions, and as the root of their 'sectarianism, dogmatism, adventurism and authoritarianism'.[11] Yet he also recognised the organising capacities of the Trotskyist groups, and during the 1980's purges of Militant from the Labour Party under Neil Kinnock, wrote a draft piece for the *Guardian* titled 'In defence of the hard left'. In it, he argued that 'despite allowing slogans rather than

hard thought to rule their conduct', the so called 'hard left', had nevertheless provided the most resolute opposition to Thatcher: 'taken as a whole, it is the socialist left, the activists, the militants who best incarnate the spirit of resistance to the injustices, the waste, the inhuman priorities, the exploitation and manipulation which are intrinsic to a social system whose dynamic is profit and greed'.[12] And he also recognised that the impact of the smaller left groups had been 'many sided and out of proportion to their actual membership'. For Miliband, what was required was a new formation, 'free from the manifold shortcomings of existing organisations and able to draw together people from such organisations as well as people who are now politically homeless'.[13] No such formation materialised, though Miliband's 'Moving On' essay stands, alongside Perry Anderson's (pre-IMG) essay 'Problems of Socialist Strategy' (1965) as one of the most important New Left attempts to clarify the strategic dilemmas facing British socialists. Here, the obvious major difference between Trotskyist and New Left outlooks lies in the latter's commitment to attempting to overcome or rethink the reform v revolution dichotomy, its rejection of (in Miliband's words) both 'crass parliamentarism' and 'straightforward revolutionism of the Leninist kind'.[14]

Culture and ethos

So far, taking my cue from Kelly's arguments about the political record of Trotskyism and its influence within broader movements, I have focused my discussion on areas of practical collaboration and joint initiative. To close, I would like to return to the New Left critique of Trotskyism and pick up on Mark Wickham-Jones' well-made point about the importance of ethos. The essence of the distinction between New Leftism and Trotskyism is to be found less in the area of doctrinal or ideological differentiation (though important divergences do clearly exist) and more around issues of strategy, of organisational structures and political culture. Major aspects of the ethos, the internal cultures and the practices of the Trotskyist organisations, in particular the relentlessness of their emphasis on party building and doctrinal orthodoxy, have been anathema to most New Leftists, who have tended to view these groups as producing a dangerously sclerosed, uncreative and essentially authoritarian politics wedded to a revolutionary model unsuited to British conditions. Related to this has been the persistence of a highly centralised political culture, apt to adopt a cynical and opportunistic approach to those involved in other social movements or left groups. Even when working with and apparently

tolerant of critiques offered by 'partner' movements and organisations, the 'centre' of the Trotskyist organisation seems often to remain largely untouched by criticism of its beliefs and practices.

Some of the most effective and well-known critiques of this style of left politics have come from socialist feminists, though it is often also evident in the more or less bitter recollections of those who have passed through and out of the Trotskyist organisations. Revisiting *Beyond the Fragments*, I found it interesting that Sheila Rowbotham (ex-IS) and Hilary Wainwright (ex-IMG), while in no sense exempting the male-dominated New Left from their critique, also noted its importance for their own intellectual and political development. Sheila Rowbotham drew a sharp distinction between the politics of the early New Left and those of the Trotskyist groups, and her critique is discussed in Kelly's book when considering the failure of the Trotskyist groups to connect with the women's and gay movements. The New Left, Rowbotham says, had a feel for the affective, emotional and experiential dimensions of socialist commitment, where the Trotskyist groups and their self-styled professional revolutionaries dealt in the currency of objective certainties, training and discipline.[15] One issue on which I would thus have welcomed more reflection is the apparent inability of the Trotskyist groups to take seriously these affective and experiential dimensions of politics. This, one suspects, must be a major factor in their inability to engage productively with women's and gay liberation, but seems likely also to have restricted their appeal more generally.

Trotskyism and the New Left have both played key roles in sustaining radical politics in Britain, both extra-Parliamentary and within sections of the Labour Party and movement. Today, as a new wave of young activists rediscovers and remakes socialist politics, their histories, and the history of their engagement, seem freshly relevant.

Notes

1 Madeleine Davis; 'Among the ordinary people: New Left Involvement in Working-Class Political Mobilization 1956-68', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 86, Autumn 2018, https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dby018
2 'Socialist Humanism', *New Reasoner* 1, 1957, p139.
3 See John McIlroy, 'John Saville and Stalinism: an exploration', and Paul Flewers, 'EP Thompson and the Soviet experience' in Paul Flewers and John McIlroy, eds, *1956: John Saville, Edward Thompson and the Reasoner*, London, 2016.

4 E. P. Thompson to Lawrence Daly, 26 March 1959, John Saville papers, University of Hull, UDJS/1/27.
5 See Christian Høgsbjerg, 'A "Trot of the milder persuasion": Raymond Challinor's Marxism', *International Socialism*, 141, 2014, available at http://isj.org.uk/a-trot-of-the-milder-persuasion-raymond-challinors-marxism/ for the relationship between the two. Challinor objected to posthumous depictions of Thompson as an apologist for Stalinism prior to 1956 – see https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/challinor/1993/11/thompson.html
6 Peter Sedgwick, 'The Two New Lefts', *International Socialism*, No.17, August 1964.
7 Peter Sedgwick, 'Pseud Left Review', *International Socialism*, No.25, Summer 1966.
8 See Duncan Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect: a history of New Left Review*, Merlin Press, 2007, pp60-72.
9 Both *Black Dwarf* and *7 Days* have been recently digitised and are now available in full via the Amiel-Melburn Trust online archive http://banmarchive.org.uk/archive_index.htm
10 Fred Halliday, memorandum, no date, Halliday papers, British Library of Political and Economic Science, File 120.
11 See his 'Moving on', *Socialist Register,* 1976, pp128-140, p138.
12 'In defence of the hard left', draft, no date, Miliband papers, Leeds University special collections, File PP/10.
13 Miliband, 'Moving On', p140.
14 Miliband to EP Thompson, replying to the latter's critique of a draft of *Parliamentary Socialism*, Miliband papers, file BO2 (1961).
15 Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the making of socialism*, London, 1979, pp126-129.