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# Trotsky's conception of self-organisation and the vanguard party (November 1989)

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The relationship between the self organisation of the working class and the organisation of its vanguard constitutes one of the most complicated problems of Marxism. Until now this problem has not been treated in a systematic manner, neither in the light of theory nor against the empirical facts of workers' struggle accumulated over one hundred and fifty years. Even though Engels (more so than Marx) touched on this problem in numerous letters and articles [1], this lack of treatment holds true for the founders of scientific socialism as well.

When one reviews the best known works which have been dedicated to this problem – Lenin's **What is to be Done** ; Rosa Luxemburg's Organisational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy ; Kautsky's writings against Bernstein, Rosa Luxemburg and the Bolsheviks ; **The Infantile Disorder** of Lenin and Bauer's **Illegal Party** – it appears that they are all of a polemical nature and have, therefore, a circumstantial and fragmentary aspect. The early writings of Lukács, **History and Class Consciousness** and **Lenin**, are at such a high level of abstraction that they are unable to systematically analyse this theme.

Nevertheless, when one looks at the complete works of several classical Marxists, one gets a different impression. For more than a quarter of a century Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg touched on this problem – central both to the theory and practice of Marxism. Their successive writings certainly do not reflect a fixed position but give the impression of a maturing process, nourished by experience. And that is precisely the reason why one may construct an integrated theory in speaking of their work even if the question of whether these authors – who never elaborated such a theory themselves – would acknowledge its validity. [2]

Trotsky can be distinguished from them by the fact that, having lived longer than Lenin and Rosa, he was able to come at the problem of class and party, self-organisation and the vanguard party during forty years of rich and varied experience of the workers' movement in a whole series of countries. He assimilated the new phenomena of fascism and Stalinism and the evolving problems of the struggle against them.

At the same time – and maybe for precisely that reason – his contributions on the theme of class and party, self-organisation and the organisation of the vanguard, have a greater heterogeneity than those of Lenin and Luxemburg. Trotsky changed his fundamental position on this question at least five times, even if there may be a common 'red thread' running through his successive positions. So while one may be able to try and tease out a synthesis of the conceptions of Lenin and Rosa, in the case of Trotsky, one must try to draw an account of his evolution. This evolution results in a response to the problem in question, which he proposes towards the end of his life.

## The dangers of a centralised vanguard party in the absence of self-organisation in the working class (1902-1905)

As is well known, Trotsky was fully on the side of Lenin, Plekhanov and Martov in their fight against the 'economists' at the time of the first **Iskra**. Lenin regarded his contribution highly and called him 'our pen'. It was Lenin who had him accepted as the youngest member of the editorial board of **Iskra**.

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From the time of the 2nd Congress of the RSDLP, which produced a separation and a provisional split [3] between the congress majority (Bolsheviks) and the minority (Mensheviks), Trotsky aligned himself to the minority. His polemic against Lenin was outlined in his pamphlet *Our Political Tasks* (1904), which is above all known for the passage which has come to be seen as both dramatic and prophetic in the light of the ultimate evolution of the CP and the history of the Soviet Union :

*"As far as the internal politics of the party are concerned, these methods lead, as we will see later on, to the organisation of the party replacing the party, the central committee replacing the organisation of the party and, finally, that a dictator replaces the central committee ; what is more they lead to a situation where committees elaborate and abrogate 'directives' while the 'people remain inactive'."* [4]

Many of Lenin's adversaries, as well as some historians, conclude on the basis of the course of events that on this problem history has shown Trotsky to be right and Lenin to be wrong. [5] They reproach Trotsky for having reviewed his position from the beginning of 1917 and to have wrongly qualified his attitude taken after the 2nd party congress. [6]

In reality, one must consider that Trotsky, as well as the Mensheviks and Rosa Luxemburg, largely misinterpreted Lenin. They tore the theses of **What is to be Done ?** from their concrete context – and the conditions prevailing at the time – in order to give them a universal character. [7]

For Lenin, it was necessary to clarify the immediate tasks of an illegal party in order to prepare a large and autonomous mass movement of the working class. His pamphlet had no other aim. It certainly did not have the intention to elaborate a general theory on the relationship between class and party, in which the former has to be subordinated in the long term to the latter and has to be placed under its paternalist control.

In the same pamphlet Lenin wrote these lines that clearly resonate as Trotskyist/Luxemburgist :

*"A professional revolutionary organisation has no significance except in relation with a truly revolutionary class which is engaged in spontaneous combat...everyone will probably agree that the 'principal of greater democracy' implies two firm conditions : firstly, complete openness and, secondly, election to all offices...We would call the German SPD a democratic organisation, because everything is done openly, including the meetings of the party congress."* [8]

After the experience of the revolution of 1905, he reinforced and restated this position in a partly self critical fashion, in that which concerned the 'stick too twisted in one direction' :

*"It should be understood that the principal reason for this success resides in the fact that the working class, of which the best elements are social democratic, distinguishes itself, for objective economic reasons, from all the classes of capitalist society by a greater aptitude for self-organisation. Without this condition, the organisation of professional revolutionaries would have been a toy, an adventure, a mere façade without nothing behind it."*

And in the same text :

*"From 1903 to 1907 ... in spite of the split, social democracy has given to the public the greatest information on the internal situation (official report of the 2nd common congress, the 3rd Bolshevik party congress, and from the common 4th congress or the common congress of Stockholm). In spite of this split, the social democratic party, before all other parties, knew how to profit from this fleeting liberty in order to create a legal organisation with an ideal democratic regime, an electoral system and representation at congress in relation to the number of organised*

members in the party." [9]

The Menshevik alternative underestimated the constraints of illegality, the threat to the continued activity of the class, the necessary, but difficult, centralisation of the experience of a fragmented struggle and, above all, the vital struggle for political autonomy, and ultimately for the hegemony of the working class in revolution. The split resulting from the 2nd party congress already contained the latent seeds of ultimate political differentiation between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks concerning the role of the Russian bourgeoisie in the imminent revolution.

But that position did not apply to Rosa Luxemburg and certainly not to Trotsky who, in the context of the political autonomy of the proletariat in the Russian revolution, didn't hold the Menshevik position at all, but a position to the left of the Bolsheviks. The position is encapsulated in the slogan 'permanent revolution'. [10] It was completely confirmed by the course of the revolution of 1917. It was developed in a practically identical manner by Lenin in the April Theses, probably without him having read Trotsky's writings on the question of 1904-1906. [11]

Nevertheless, it is true that, if Lenin succeeded in shrugging off all inclinations of 'substitutionism' in the course of the diverse phases of the rise of mass activity, that was certainly not the case for the majority of the 'old Bolsheviks'. This explains why they took a waiting, not to say a frankly critical, attitude to the constitution of the Petrograd Soviet in 1905, and why they didn't decide until later on to join and fully support it. [12]

It is certainly to Trotsky's merit to have first recognised that the soviet was the most complete expression of the self-organisation of the working class, produced by history itself, as much as the future form of workers' power. That which Lenin expressed in **State and Revolution** and to that which Gramsci, and later the Comintern, gave a theoretical social basis, was already anticipated by Trotsky in his pamphlet **The Balance sheet and perspectives**. [13]

Workers councils are the organs of the proletarian revolution. They cannot exist in non-revolutionary times. Experiments with the form of workers' councils as attempted by the Dutch communists Gorter and Pannekoek, as well as those of the German KPD have been refuted by historical experience. It is possible for mass unions to grow and prosper when capitalism is in a temporary phase of stability. It is not the same for workers' councils. What is more, after the conquest of state power by the working class, a certain falling off of self-activity of the class can limit or even abolish the functioning of the councils as organs of the exercising of direct power by the working class. [14]

## The dangers of declining mass activity and the absence of an autonomous vanguard (1907-1914)

It follows that there is a necessity for dialectical interaction between the self-organisation of the class – which is subject to considerable fluctuations – and a permanent vanguard party, whose size and influence are equally subject to the highs and lows of the general conjuncture, but which is nevertheless more stable, which can engage in continuous work and which can therefore better resist the pressure brought by unfavourable forces. The loss of such an asset, the organisation and its cadres implanted in the class, could hinder the eventual success of the mass struggle.

Thus the existence of such a vanguard organisation facilitates that success. [15] Trotsky had not seen this danger after the congress of Stockholm of the RSDLP. His underestimation of the danger of the liquidationist position, his unprincipled alliance with the Mensheviks, despite the profound political differences between them, his conciliatory attitude which uncoupled the practical and organisational question from all political content – partly under the

influence of German 'centrism', that is to say Kautsky, whose political limits he nevertheless judged more correctly than Lenin – mean that his errors of the 1907-1914 period were graver than those of the time of the first split. What is more, they have exercised a particularly unfortunate influence on the ultimate historic evolution of the CPSU because they are the basis of the profound distrust in which the 'old Bolsheviks' held Trotsky.

# 1917-1919 : the synthesis of soviet power and the vanguard organisation

Immediately after the outbreak of the revolution of February 1917, Lenin and Trotsky adopted an identical position on the task facing the proletariat. It was expressed in the slogan "All Power to the Soviets." Lenin's **April Theses** constituted on this point a change in direction which provoked initial resistance from the 'old Bolsheviks'. [16] It is very significant that it was above all the 'worker Bolsheviks', that is to say the proletarian cadres, the worker vanguard, including non-members of the party, who supported Lenin all down the line, and which allowed him to quickly overcome the resistance of the party cadres. At the same time Trotsky is correcting his conception of the Bolshevik party as an 'isolated sect'. He recognises completely the role that the worker vanguard, educated by the party, has already played in the February revolution. [17]

This leads him to abandon all his ideas of conciliation and unity with the Mensheviks, so much more because the problem of strategic disagreements on the ultimate course of the revolution constitute, for Trotsky and for Lenin, a question of life and death, of victory or defeat, and not a secondary problem.

Paradoxically, it is now several 'old Bolsheviks' like Kamenev, Stalin and Molotov, who defend a conciliatory attitude vis-à-vis the Mensheviks. [18] In any case there is now a quick fusion between the 'interrayonists', inspired by Trotsky, and the Bolsheviks. Lenin expresses his definitive appreciation of this, which he will not change right up to his death : "Trotsky has understood that unity with the Mensheviks is impossible and from that point there was no better Bolshevik than Trotsky." [19]

In part because he is president of the Petrograd soviet, in part because of his untiring agitation amongst the masses, in part because of his leadership of the military revolutionary committee of the soviets, which carries the victory in the October uprising mainly by means of political agitation, to the point where he will convince the Petrograd garrison to subordinate itself to the soviet rather than to bourgeois headquarters, Trotsky resolves in practice the problem of self-organisation and the vanguard party, before going on to master it theoretically.

This solution finds its expression compressed in the simultaneity of the armed uprising and of the second congress of soviets in 1919. The uprising is neither a conspiracy nor a minority putsch. It is the expression of the democratic decision of the great majority of the Russian working class and poor peasantry to establish the power of the soviets, "the workers' and peasants' state". [20] In practice the winning of the majority of the working class to the slogan "all power to the Soviets" isn't possible without the permanent, influential engagement of the Bolshevik party. Even non-Bolshevik witnesses confirm this without reserve. [21] The dialectical unity between the self-organised working class and the vanguard party here attains its classical maturity. Instead of conflicting with each other in some manner, they stimulate each other.

In his history of the Russian revolution Trotsky is succinct :

"The dynamic of revolutionary events is directly determined by the rapid, intensive and passionate psychological conversion from the pre-revolutionary class structures ... the masses engage in revolution entirely without a finished plan for social transformation, but in experiencing the bitter sentiment of no longer being able to tolerate the old

regime. It is only the leading sections of the class that possess a political programme which, nonetheless, needs to be to be verified by events and approved by the masses. The essential political process of a revolution is precisely located in the working class understanding the problems posed by the social crisis, and that they actively orientate themselves using the method of successive approximation ... It is only by the study of the political process of the masses that one may understand the role of parties and of leaders which we are too inclined to ignore. They constitute a non-autonomous, but very important, element in the process. Without a leading organisation the energy of the masses will dissipate like steam from a broken cylinder. However, the movement doesn't come from the cylinder, nor from the piston, but from the steam." [22]

This dialectical unity and mutual cross-fertilisation of class self-organisation and the activity of the vanguard party, characteristic of 1917, continued through the construction of the young soviet state and the formation of the Red Army. Contrary to a widespread legend, both inside and outside the Soviet Union, the years 1918 and 1919 were the summits of the autonomous self-organisation of the Russian working class, even more so than in 1917. This claim is supported by innumerable documentary, journalistic and literary sources. [23] An involuntary testimony is even provided by the reactionary author Solzhenitsyn, today a fervent enemy of the October revolution. He writes that after an unjust condemning to death of by the revolutionary tribunal, the soviet of prison guards take up the cause of the condemned and forces a change in judgement. [24] Where in modern history can one find such devolved democracy ? In which capitalist country is such a thing possible today ?

In Trotsky's above mentioned passage, the problem of 'the leading role of the party' is defined in a classical Marxist manner. Without this leading role all the enormous potential of the movement is at risk of evaporating. But a leading role isn't, according to the erroneous formula of Plekhanov at the second congress of the RSPD, a 'right of seniority'. The leading role must be constantly gained and regained politically, that's to say democratically. The majority of the masses must agree to it. It cannot establish itself but in the struggle for the majority. And the convictions of the party, even its programme, are neither infallible nor immutable. They change as they are tested in practice. They can do no other but accompany the self-activity of the masses.

When one strips the slogan 'the leading role of the party' of these three limitations, it becomes in the best of cases a dogmatic, sectarian caricature and, in the worst of cases, as under the Stalinist and post-Stalinist dictatorship, a means of marshalling and regimenting the working class and to stifle its self-activity, including the use of repressive measures.

## The 'dark years' 1920-1921 : Trotsky slides towards 'substitutionism'

For it to be possible to have an interaction between the self-organisation of the working class and the leading political activity of the revolutionary vanguard party, it is necessary to have an active working class, or at least a large, active vanguard. But as we have already said, under capitalism this cannot always be guaranteed ; it is practically impossible as a permanent phenomenon. The experience of the Russian revolution, and in all ultimately successful revolutions, has demonstrated that even in post-capitalist societies such permanent auto-activity is not a given. Here as well it is subject to conjunctural rises and falls. It achieves its summit in the period of the maximum height of the revolution (which is practically a tautology). It diminishes at the same time as the revolutionary process passes its apogee. This was the situation in Russia at the end of the civil war, in 1920-1921.

It would be interesting to examine the psycho-political reasons for such a diminution. People cannot live in a permanent state of tension and extreme activity. The constraining need to rest from time to time is nearly psychological. But more important than this consideration, which is part of common experience, it is the weight of the material conditions of life which determines the ebbing of mass political activity.



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In the case of Russia in 1920-1921, they are well known and frequently cited : the numerical enfeeblement of the proletariat by the decline of productive forces and industry provoked by the civil war ; the no less important qualitative enfeeblement of the proletariat by the massive transfer of the best forces to the Red Army and to the youthful apparatus of the soviet state ; the progressive change in the motivation of the workers towards security of their immediate existence, the search for food etc, under the influence of hunger and misery ; the growing abandonment of the hope for a speedy improvement in the conditions of life through revolutionary victories abroad, particularly in Germany ; the growing difficulty of the workers, once more characterised by an insufficient cultural level, in directly exercising power through the soviets.

This train of causes can be put more concretely by two formulas : the backward character of the country and the isolation of the revolution in a hostile capitalist world, both limits, in the short term, to the range of self-activity of the Russian working class, including real involvement in state power. Instead of leading the class in the exercise of state power, the governing party more and more takes the place of the class.

During the decisive months of the decline in activity, this replacement was probably inevitable. The working class was reduced to 35% of its number of 1917. Even the leader of the worker opposition, the old Bolshevik Shlyapnikov, adapting Lenin, said, in part ironically, in part seriously,

"I congratulate you, comrade Lenin, for exercising the dictatorship of the proletariat in the name of a proletariat that doesn't exist." [\[25\]](#)

But today, when we look back, we are able to understand more clearly than was possible at the time, that this phenomenon was conjunctural and short term and not structural. Immediately after the start of the NEP, both industry and the working class begin to increase again. There was no long lasting disappearance of the Russian working class. The official history affirms that the numerical importance of the working class had, by 1926, passed the level of 1917. The opposition fix it to an earlier date. The exact date is of little importance. What matters is the principal tendency indicates a reconstitution and enlargement of the class.

And so the question is posed – whether, in the light of the growing quantitative and qualitative force of the Russian working class from 1922, the concrete political measures of the Bolshevik leaders and their medium and long term strategy concerning the exercise of power, have favoured or hindered the flowering of self-activity of the class. Today the answer seems clear to us : from 1920-1921 they hindered it, they did not favour it. Worse still : the justification and general theorisation of the 'substitution' of the power of the party for the power of the class during the 'dark years' of 1920-1921, have considerably reinforced this braking role. That goes, above all, for practical measures : banning of all soviet parties except the CP, banning of internal faction in the CP.

During the last years of his life, Trotsky subjected himself to explicit self-criticism on this subject :

"The banning of the opposition parties lead to the banning of factions. The banning of factions ended up with the banning of 'thinking differently to the infallible leadership'. The monolithic party, acting as a police force has lead to the impunity of the bureaucracy, an impunity which became the source of arbitrary, unlimited corruption." [L. Trotsky, **The Revolution Betrayed**, New Park Publications, London 1967, our translation.]]

From the moment when these decisions were taken, Trotsky along with the entire leadership of the CP, approved and defended them for some years. They were even less appropriate since they were taken after the end of the civil war.

The theoretical justification of 'substitutionism' will have yet more catastrophic consequences in the long term, though

Trotsky formulated this thesis in a less radical way than Lenin and did not talk of the obsolescence of class or of a permanent incapacity of the class to exercise power. He wrote :

"Today we have before us a peace proposal from the government of Poland. Who will decide this ? We have the Soviet of the Commissars of the People, but that as well ought to be placed under some control. Control by whom ?"

The control of the working class, which is an amorphous, chaotic mass ? The Central Committee of the party is convoked to discuss this proposition and to decide how to respond. If we have to be leaders in war, to put our hands on new divisions and to find the best elements to man them, who should we turn to ? We turn towards the party. Towards the Central Committee. It sends directives to local party committees calling communists to the front. The same thing goes for agriculture, distribution and other problems. [26]

Here substitution of the class by the party and of the party by the leadership (in this context Lenin even talked of an 'oligarchy') is taken to its ultimate logic, without taking account of its social and political consequences. [27] It is no longer a question of autonomous functioning of the soviets, nor of a separation between the party and the state.

## Internal party democracy – the bridge to soviet democracy (1923-1929)

From 1923, Trotsky, who in 1921 was still theoretically justifying the process of burgeoning bureaucracy, started to recognise its dangers. Later than Lenin, but more completely than him, he started to fight it on the front on which, according to him, the combat had the only hope of success : inside the party itself.

The fight for internal party democracy was, for the left opposition, the bridge towards the reconquest of the democracy of the soviets. Trotsky and his supporters still hesitated in turning to workers outside the party. They certainly hesitated in turning to them above the head of the party leadership. He and his supporters would not do this until later on.

This hesitation was not based on irresolute 'centrism'. It resulted from a fundamentally pessimistic evaluation of the degree of self-activity of the Russian working class. It resulted from the opinion that the Russian revolution was engaged in a historical process of retreat. [28] In these conditions the impulsion for a rebirth of workers' democracy (soviet democracy) had to come from the party itself. Only the party was capable of creating the conditions for a gradual rebirth of the soviet democracy.

Trotsky's offensive on this issue, initiated by the fight of the '46', the first left opposition of October 1923, seemed to be crowned with success. The Political Bureau accepted his propositions. But they remained a dead letter. In practice the party apparatus around Stalin, supported by nearly all the members of the Politburo, above all Zinoviev and Kamenev, but also Bukharin, Rykov, Tomski and others, launched a systematic campaign aiming to reduce the opposition to silence, to hinder discussion, to suppress autonomous thought in the cadres and the membership, to generalise obedience and conformism under the cover of 'democratic centralism'.

This signified a total rupture with the traditions of Bolshevism and the CP which, contrary to the legend spread as much by the Stalinists as by the enemies of Lenin, were characterised by free and public discussion and disagreement. This constituted the transition from democratic centralism [29] to bureaucratic centralism.

The system of nomination to party offices by the summit (and, in the case of 'disobedients', of their transfer to towns



where they had no support in the party base), instead of democratic selection by the members, was the principal organisational instrument used to suffocate internal democracy. [30] The development of an enormous apparatus of functionaries was the sociological expression of this process – immediately after the revolution there were less than 1000 bureaucrats ; in 1922-1923 there were already fifteen times as many ; shortly after one hundred times as many. The apparatus became autonomous and gradually became a specific social strata in soviet society : the soviet bureaucracy. [31]

Already in October 1923 the '46' had analysed the process of degeneration with a remarkable perspicacity. Today their diagnosis has a prophetic ring. It has been repeated in a practically identical fashion by the supporters of Gorbachev, sixty five years too late, it's true :

... behind the exterior show of official unity, [we have] in reality a unilateral selection of people who adapt themselves to the conceptions and sympathies of a small circle and who behave as one would expect of them...Faced with a party leadership deformed by such manipulative restrictions, the party has for the most part ceased to be a living collective, provided with personal initiative that subtly senses the living reality, which is linked by a thousand threads to that reality. In place of this we note an open division of the party between a hierarchy of secretaries and the 'profane' : between professional functionaries, selected from the top, and the rest of the party membership, which has no place in public life.

This is known to all the members of the party. Members who do not agree with one or other directive from the central or even regional committee, who have some doubt, who note 'for themselves' one or other error, one or other disagreement or one or other intolerable situation, are scared to talk about it at party meetings. Worse, they are even scared to talk about it amongst themselves, unless their listener is totally trustworthy. In practice free discussion in the heart of the party no longer exists, the public opinion of the party has become mute. The committees of the government and the central committee of the CP are not constituted and elected by the mass of the members.

On the contrary, more and more the hierarchy of party secretaries select delegates to conferences and congresses, which become more and more meetings of the hierarchy where it promulgates its own instructions. The regime which has been installed in the heart of the party is completely unaccountable. It kills independent initiative in the party. It replaces the party with an apparatus of selected functionaries, which works very well in normal times but which will inevitably fail in times of crisis ... [32]

Was the attempt by Trotsky and the left opposition to restore internal party democracy, taking account of the situation, illusory ? It was less so, in any case, than an attempt to reactivate at a single stroke a deceived and largely passive working mass, even if it sympathised with the opposition.

Today we know from the archives which have been opened in the USSR, that the opposition had the majority not only among the young communists in Moscow but also in the whole Moscow party ; a vote which was directly and impudently falsified by Stalin and his apparatus. From an historical point of view it involved a call to conscience, to tradition, to the very nature of the leading Bolshevik cadres, to their political sensibilities and their theoretical comprehension. The attempt failed. The tragedy of this failure consists of the fact that these leading cadres nearly all understood the situation, sooner or later, but not all at the same time, and usually too late. They paid with their lives.

The international and Soviet working class has, as a result, paid an enormous price in useless sacrifice, most notably as human victims.

## The final synthesis : 1930-1940

For ten years from 1923 to 1933 Trotsky confronted the problem of the Soviet Thermidor – the political counter-revolution in the USSR. This analytical effort coincided with his struggle to clarify in a theoretical manner the link between 'self-organisation of the class and the vanguard', in the light of the degeneration of the first workers' state.

But not only in the light of that experience. Partially, later on, from the rise of the fascist danger in Germany, partially from the experience of the English general strike in 1926, Trotsky formulates a number of conclusions on the relationships of class, mass unions, soviets and worker parties, which, as far as he was concerned, were definitively confirmed by the tragic experiences of the Spanish revolution of 1936-1939. They can be resumed in the form of the following theses :

- The working class is not homogenous either socially or in terms of consciousness. Its relative heterogeneity at least implies the possibility, if not the fatality, of the formation of several political and party currents, which are supported by fractions of the class.
- The struggle for victories in the daily life of the working class, as well as immediate economic and political demands (perhaps against the danger of fascism), demands a strong degree of unity in action of the class. The struggle thus demands organisations that include workers of differing political convictions and different organisational loyalties, that is, a party based on a united front of action between different parties and currents. Mass unions and workers' councils are examples of such organisations. In the Spanish revolution, militia committees played the same role, above all in Catalonia.
- Even when they are partially or, during some periods, totally lead by an apparatus which is strongly integrated in the bourgeois state (bourgeois society), mass organisations do not exclusively represent forms of integration and subordination. They still retain at least a dual character, and they at least remain potential instruments of emancipation and self-activity of the class. They are 'the seeds of proletarian democracy inside bourgeois democracy'. [\[33\]](#)
- The revolutionary vanguard party distinguishes itself from other workers' parties essentially by the fact that in its programme, its strategy and its current practice it totally represents and defends the immediate and historic interests of the working class, a defence oriented towards the overthrow of the bourgeois state and the capitalist mode of production and towards the construction of a socialist society without class. To attain this goal it must convince the majority of the working class of the justice of its programme and its strategy and its current practice. This can only be done by political rather than administrative methods. It demands, among other things, a correct application of the tactics of the united proletarian front. It demands respect for the autonomy and the freedom of action of all worker organisations.
- The same rules of conduct apply *mutatis mutandis* for the construction of the workers' state and in the exercise of political power (with the possible exception of during an active civil war). In the course of this process, the leading role of the revolutionary party is guaranteed by the success of its political conviction, not by administrative methods, and certainly not by repression of sections of the working class. It can only be realised by the principal of the effective application of politics ; rigorous separation of party and state, direct exercise of power by the organs of the working population, elected democratically and not by the vanguard itself, multi-partyism : Workers and peasants must be free to elect who they want to the workers' councils. [\[34\]](#)
- Socialist democracy, democracy in the soviet and the union , democracy in the party (rights of tendencies, no banning of factions even if they are 'in themselves' undesirable) have need of each other. These are not abstract conditions but practical conditions for an effective workers' fight and for the effective construction of socialism. Without proletarian democracy, the proletarian united front and thus the victorious workers' struggle, is, in the best case, put in danger and, in the worst case, rendered impossible. [\[35\]](#) Without socialist democracy an effective, planned socialist economy is equally impossible.

Since the birth of these theses in the years 1930-1936, nothing has happened in the east or in the west to cast doubt on their validity. On the contrary : subsequent historical development, as much in the capitalist countries as in those called 'socialist', has entirely confirmed their historical and theoretical pertinence. [\[36\]](#)

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[1] In this context, the most important Engels' texts are the articles from the years 1890-1895, found in vol.22 of **MEW**, as well as in his vast correspondence with representatives of European and North American socialism (**MEW**, vols.35-38).

[2] Gramsci's most important writings devoted to this problem are not his prison notebooks but his articles in **Ordine Nuovo**, above all during 1919-1921 (Antonio Gramsci, **Scritti Politici**, a cura di Paolo Spriano, Editore Riuniti, Rome 1973, 3 vols.).

[3] The split in the RSDLP was provisional because it was overcome at the Stockholm congress of 1906. The Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were really two public factions rather than two distinct parties. They only became so after 1912.

[4] **Unsere politische Aufgaben (Our Political Tasks)**, cited here from Leon Trotsky, **Schriften zur Revolutionären Organisation**, Revolution Klassiker, Hamburg 1970, p.73.

[5] See Robert Daniels **The Conscience of the Revolution** ; Isaac Deutscher. **The Prophet Armed**, vol.1 of the biography of Trotsky in 3 volumes pp.95-97, Oxford University Press, 1954.

[6] Robert Daniels, op. cit.

[7] The much quoted slogan of Lenin in **What is to be Done ?** on the revolutionary intellectuals who have to introduce 'from the inside' socialist consciousness in the working class, finds its origin with Kautsky and Victor Adler in the programme said to be by Hainsfeld on the Austrian social democracy.

[8] Lenin, **What is to be Done ?**, Works, vol.5 p.489.

[9] Lenin, preface to the collection **Twelve Years, Works**, vol.13, pp.102-103.

[10] One knows that at the heart of the Russian social democracy there were three conceptions on the form of the state (the form of government) which would be able to achieve the bourgeois democratic tasks of the Russian revolution. The Mensheviks believed that it could be achieved under a democratic bourgeois government, faced with which the social democracy would lead a benevolent opposition. This choice of critical support was transformed later into that of a coalition. The Bolsheviks were in favour of the conquest of power by the working class linked to the peasantry, in the frame of a bourgeois state (democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasants). Trotsky defended the dictatorship of the proletariat, supported by the poor peasantry.

[11] In his will, written just before his suicide, which was addressed to Trotsky, the diplomat Joffe, leading member of the CP categorically declared that Lenin had told him that, from 1906, Trotsky was right on the question of the permanent revolution.

[12] Cf. Theses for the 2nd Congress of the Comintern on the situation in which soviets ought to be formed. Cf. also Antonio Gramsci, **op. cit.** ; also Karl Korsch, **Schriften zur Socialisierung**, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, Frankfurt 1969.

[13] A parallel anticipation has been made by the American socialist Daniel De Lon, though in a less systematic manner.

[14] On the KPD, the German Workers' Union etc, cf. edited and preface by Fritz Kool : **Die Linke gegen die Parteiherrschaft**, vol.3 of the **Dokumente der Weltrevolution**, Walter Verlag, Olten 1970.

[15] The rise in workers' struggle in Russia from 1912 was undoubtedly favoured by the Bolshevik faction of the party.

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[16] On the resistance of the 'old Bolsheviks' against the theses of Lenin, cf. Marcel Liebman, **Le Léninisme sous Lénine**, vol.1.

[17] Leon Trotsky, **History of the Russian Revolution**, vol. 1 : **fevrier**, editions de Seuil, Paris 1967.

[18] See Roy Medvedev, **Let History Judge**, Macmillan, London 1972, p.8, and Marcel Leibman, **op. cit.**

[19] Report of the first legal meeting of the Petrograd committee of the Bolshevik party, 1st November 1917, reproduced in facsimile in **The Stalin School of Falsification**, Leon Trotsky, Pathfinder Press, New York 1971, pp.103-104.

[20] Witness not only the results of the totally free election for the 2nd and 3rd Soviet Congresses but also those for the Constituent Assembly, which gave in the cities a majority of more than 60% of votes for parties calling for soviet power.

[21] For example N.N. Sukhanov : **The Russian Revolution** 1917, vol.1, Harper TorchBooks, New York 1962, p.194

[22] L. Trotsky, **History of the Russian Revolution**, vol.1, pp. 34-35.

[23] See amongst others Victor Serge, **Year One of the Russian Revolution** and Alfred Rosmer, **Lenin's Moscow**.

[24] Alexander Solzhenitsyn, **The Gulag Archipelago**, Scherz-Verlag, Berne 1973, p.194

[25] On Shlyapnikov and the workers' opposition on the CP, see **Arbeiterdemokratie oder Parteidiktatur**, edited by Fritz Kool-Erwin Oberlinder, Walter-Verlag, Olten 1967, pp.158-223.

[26] L. Trotsky, discourse of the 26th July 1920 before the 2nd Congress of the Comintern, in the **First Five Years of the Communist International**, Pioneer Publishers, New York 1945, pp.99-100. Our translation.

[27] Isaac Deutscher (in the first volume of his biography of Trotsky, chapter 14), gives a series of other examples of Trotsky sliding into substitutionism during 1920-1921, amongst others his discourse before the 10th Congress of the CP.

[28] Some years later August Thalheimer formulated a similar judgement : "with the enfeeblement of the spirit of the (former) revolutionary, the bureaucratic ashes grow. In the measure that the revolutionary activity of the base diminishes, the self sufficiency of the summit develops" (**Zur Krise in der KPD**, Junius-Verlag, Berlin 1929, p.6) We do not know if Bukharin arrived at the same conclusion.

[29] Very few people know that the term 'democratic centralism' is in reality of Menshevik origin (Raphael Abramovitch : Julius Martow in **Julius Martow : Sein Werk und seine Bedeutung für den Sozialismus**, Verlag der Sozialistische Bote, Berlin 1924, p.10). In an interesting interview in the **Moskauer Nachrichten** of 15th October 1989, Léo Onikov, apparatchik of the CC of the CPSU furnishes a detailed analysis of the bureaucratic deformation of the concept of 'democratic centralism' by Stalin and his institutionalisation of the 17th and of the 27th Congress of the CPSU. The final victory of bureaucratic centralism wasn't achieved, according to Onikov, until after the bloody purges of 1937.

[30] As a means of additional pressure on the workers and members of the CP, the threat of sacking, that's to say unemployment.

[31] Christian Rakovsky, leading member of the Central Committee, friend of Trotsky and co-leader of the left opposition, has described the judgemental manner of this process in his article The professional dangers of power, in : **Bolsheviks against Stalin, 1923-1928**, Pathfinder Press, 1957, publications of the Fourth International, pp.149-163.

[32] The declaration of the '46' of the 15th October 1923 in **Die Linke Opposition in der Sowjet-Union, vol. 1, 1923-1924**, edited by Ulf Wolter, editions Prinkipo, Berlin 1976, pp.213-214.

[33] L. Trotsky, **Schriften über Deutschland**, vol.1, Europäische Verlags-Anstalt, Frankfurt 1971, p.198.

[34] In the **Transitional Programme of the Fourth International** drafted by Trotsky, p.37. These theses have above all been elaborated in L.

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Trotsky, **Schriften über Deutschland** (see note 35), on France and Spain see L. Trotsky, **The Spanish Revolution 1931-1939**, Pathfinder Press, New York 1973 ; Leon Trotsky, *On France*, Monad Press, New York 1973.

[35] Missing from original French text.

[36] The programme document *Socialist democracy and the dictatorship of the proletariat*, adopted at the 12th congress of the Fourth International has systematised and codified these theses.