Without correct theory, there cannot be correct politics

Trotsky

Introduction:
The problem and the argument

The self-movement of the peasantry in Russia in the late 1920s created a crisis of production in agriculture that led to chronic shortfalls in the supply of food to the cities and towns, threatening the urban citizenry with malnutrition, if not famine. The cause of this major economic contraction lay in millions of peasant-households freely deciding to safeguard their material well-being; decisions the Bolsheviks were quite powerless to influence in any meaningful way so long as they chose to respect peasant self-determination, the sine qua non of the New Economic Policy. For this socio-economic crisis signalled the presence of a barrier to the development of the forces of production built into peasant-proprietorship. No wing of the leadership, Trotskyist ‘Left’, Bukharinist ‘Right’ and Stalinist ‘Centre’, could overcome that barrier and go on developing the economy collectively and democratically – build socialism – without forcibly destroying the peasant-way of life. In December 1929,

1. Bukharin, Trotsky and, until 1929, Stalin, represented emerging eponymous policy-trends that were not fully homogenous. Nevertheless, there was sufficient accord on
Stalin began to do just that. He imposed collectivisation on the peasantry, breaking their most desperate resistance. In the cities, Stalin gutted democratically-elected factory-committees, last redoubts of workers’ power at the point of production, and embarked on a crash-course of forced industrialisation. On the ruins of the October Revolution, Stalin re-established a class-divided, exploitative society very much akin to the late tsarist order with respect to class- and property-relations but substituting the ideology and iconography of ‘Marxism-Leninism’ for that of Russian Orthodoxy, the hammer and sickle for the double-headed tsarist Imperial Eagle.2

This sombre outcome was not foreordained. But its theoretical possibility had been negatively inscribed in Marx’s precept that socialism required definite material premises: minimally, a capitalist economy that had moved beyond the stage of primitive-capitalist accumulation and, therefore, could reproduce itself on bases continually posited by its own existence, manifested by the rapid formation of a proletariat, the sole agent of socialism. Without those premises, socialism became a utopian project, all efforts to develop it doomed to fail. This chapter revalorises Marx’s precept without arguing that Stalinism became inevitable simply because those premises were absent in Russia. The alternative to Stalinism, however, was not Trotskyism or Bukharinism taken as viable programmes for economic development. In this regard, both Trotskyism and Bukharinism were variants of NEP-premised programmes of economic advance. As such, they proved to be utter failures, not because of the particular characteristics of either, but because both chose to operate within the framework of the NEP. That framework mandated no use of coercion against the immediate producers, peasants and workers alike.

fundamental issues relevant to this paper that differences between individuals within these trends were not crucial: they may be ignored without prejudice.

2. Parenthetically, unlike developments in coastal China, the disaggregation of the USSR in 1991 marked less a transition to capitalism than preservation of existing class- and property-relations at a lower level of political aggregation, based on the revival of long-repressed national, ethnic and/or religious ties. Demagogic ex-CP leaders became born-again ‘democrats’ derailed the working-class response to the crisis taking embryonic shape in the great coal-strikes of 1989, strikes which were cross-national, inter-ethnic and supra-religious, consistent with nature of the economic crisis itself. In lieu of the suppressed democratic-socialist alternative blackjack-democracy now dominates in Russia, where the leadership has disestablished the ersatz religion of ‘Marxism-Leninism’ to make room for the triumphant return of the genuine article, Russian Orthodoxy. Meanwhile, the tsarist coat of arms, symbol of Russian imperialism, again adorns the corridors and banquet halls of the Kremlin, displacing the hammer and sickle. While oligarchs flaunt their wealth, wages, hours and working conditions for the vast majority have collapsed, expressed in the stunning fall of life-expectancy. The Bourbon Restoration did not undo the French Revolution, and this Restoration did not undo the Russian Revolution either, because Stalin had undone it long before. See Kotz 2001 for the facts.