Reconsidering Trotsky’s Theory

Over the years, Trotsky broadly defined the problem of Soviet bureaucracy in three different ways: as one of inefficiency in military supply and the economy, in terms of the independence of the state and party apparatuses from proletarian control and their responsiveness to alien class pressures, and as a distinct social formation that had attained a high degree of autonomy from all social classes. At each point his understanding of the issue was shaped by his own major concerns at the time, by his previous image of bureaucracy, and by his analysis of current events. At the same time, throughout these years his political activities as well as his analysis of Soviet politics, society, and history were largely guided and shaped by his evolving understanding of the general nature of the problem of bureaucracy.

9.1 The Development of Trotsky’s Views

In the years immediately after the revolution, most Bolsheviks derived their conception of bureaucracy from the primary popular understanding of that term, and from the traditional Marxist analysis of that concern. Consequently, they viewed the problem of Soviet bureaucracy in terms of the alienation of political institutions from the masses and as directly related to the presence of bourgeois influence in the state apparatus. In that period, Trotsky perceived the problem quite differently. Largely preoccupied with the effective operation of the war machine and of the economy, and drawing upon popular secondary meanings of the term, he defined the problem of bureaucracy almost exclusively as one of inefficiency. During the civil war and immediately afterwards, he focused especially on the phenomenon of glavokratiia – an inefficient system characterised by an excessive concentration of economic power in the industrial glavki and tsendry and by the inadequate coordination of those bodies. This understanding influenced his policy choices and his political behaviour in several important ways. Most immediately, it led him to emphasise the importance of economic planning – a concern that would become a lifelong preoccupation – and to support an increase in the autonomy permitted to enterprises and local economic organs. Additionally, it impelled him to dismiss the value of Lenin’s primary institutional solution for the problem of
bureaucracy, the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspectorate. However, it also helped bring him into an anti-bureaucratic alliance with Lenin in late 1922.

Beyond that, Trotsky’s emphasis on economic planning as a means of eliminating *glavkokratiia* contributed greatly to his development of a new understanding of the problem of bureaucracy in 1923. Facing continued opposition by the leadership majority to enhanced economic planning, even after it had been endorsed by the Twelfth Party Congress, Trotsky began to see this resistance as a manifestation of political alienation. The problem, he argued, was that market forces and alien class pressures, as well as the specialisation of officials, were pushing the state and party leadership to the right. The danger was that the increasing separation of the party leadership from the control of the rank and file would further promote this rightward drift. Again, his analysis of the problem played a major role in guiding his political behaviour, leading him in late 1923 into oppositional activity on behalf of party democracy, largely as a means of changing economic policy.

Although he was defeated in that struggle, Trotsky returned to the political and theoretical offensive in 1926–7 with the formation of the United Opposition. In those years his perception that the party regime had continued to deteriorate and that both economic and international policy had moved further to the right increasingly convinced him of the direct relationship between bureaucratisation and the responsiveness of the state and party apparatuses to alien class pressures. In line with this, he put forward a comprehensive and coherent theory of Soviet bureaucracy based entirely upon that understanding. Even more sharply than before, he asserted that a shift in the balance of class forces had pressured the leadership into implementing rightist policies while repressing workers’ democracy. Ultimately, he warned, this process could culminate in capitalist restoration – most likely by a gradual and phased ‘Thermidorian’ route. Only the Opposition, he argued, representing the proletarian vanguard, could reform the party by pushing it back to the left and compelling a restoration of workers’ democracy.

In late 1927 the Opposition was beaten and thousands, including Trotsky, were sent into internal exile. However, this was followed, not as Trotsky had anticipated, by a strengthening of the party right and the restoration of capitalism, but by a series of ‘leftist’ initiatives in economic and Comintern policy and by the defeat of the right wing of the party leadership by the Stalinist centre. Continuing to insist upon the validity of his theory, Trotsky attempted to reconcile the contradictions between theory and reality by means of a series of ad hoc theoretical modifications and strained interpretations of events. While increasingly emphasising the autonomy of the state and party apparatuses,