

dead, but of what is already living” can we not reasonably say that in theology likewise the pastness of the past and its comparative cultural remoteness need not preclude our examination of the claims of past figures and works to greatness?

## **Trotsky’s Morals And Ours Political Morality And The Revolutionary Christian**

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This article is based on Trotsky’s article *Their Morals and Ours* (*New International*, February 1938) which I will refer to as TMO. Taken together with his second article *The Moralists and Sycophants against Marxism* (*New International*, 9 June 1939)<sup>1</sup> which reiterates many of the same arguments TMO is important because it represents a clear and consistent account of the moral philosophy of Revolutionary Marxism. In passing I should point out that even talking about the moral philosophy of Marxism is a little contradictory since for Marxism political philosophy and moral philosophy are the same thing. In classical times no distinction was made between the political and the moral obligations of man. In the Greek city state a good member of the *polis* was quite simply a good man. Only with the rise of capitalism did it become necessary to posit the Kantian moral imperative as something external to the social and political life of man.<sup>2</sup> In his essay on Kant<sup>3</sup> Herbert Marcuse argues that Capitalist ideology was faced with two conflicting needs. On the one hand it was necessary to foster individualism as an essential component of the growth of capitalist economy but on the other hand it was necessary to subordinate the individual to the needs of the bourgeois state. If the individual were subordinated by crude repression this would expose the mythological character of capitalist freedom of the individual. By positing the moral *a priori*, a call to duty above class, Kant provided bourgeois ideology with the solution to this problem. Like Marx but unlike Marcuse TMO is polemical rather than speculative in tone, written in a specific historical situation to meet specific charges against Marxism.

Obviously this is in some way a limitation - the particular ethical and political problems of the Russian Civil War will never be exactly reproduced. However what appears at first sight as a disadvantage is, in fact, an advantage since the Marxist method is always characterised by specificity, the application of the dialectical method to particular historical circumstances. Indeed it is this very quality of flexibility that makes Marxism such an invaluable theoretical tool for the practice of socialist revolution.

TMO was written in 1928, during Trotsky's exile in Mexico at the height of the Stalinist repression of the left opposition in the Soviet Union. At this time when hundreds of thousands of revolutionaries and their families were being liquidated in Russian prison camps, liberal and moderate socialist opinion throughout the world was almost completely silent or incredulous. It was at such a time that Trotsky was obliged to answer criticism from many of his erstwhile supporters. Faced with the empirical fact of the degeneration of the Russian revolution, Max Eastman, Victor Serge, Souvarine and others attributed this degeneration not primarily to the objective circumstances of Russian backwardness, the devastating consequences of the intervention of fourteen imperialist countries in the Russian Civil War or the failure of the revolution in Western Europe, but rather to a subjective moral weakness in the leaders of the Bolshevik revolution. The moral relativism of Stalin was seen as foreshadowed in the moral relativism of Lenin and Trotsky. It was argued that both Bolsheviks and the Stalinists proceeded on the principle that the end justified any means - even the shooting of other revolutionaries or the execution of hostages.

In the course of the two articles Trotsky defends his record in the Civil War and attacks the inconsistency of his liberal critics. In parenthesis he says a certain amount about religious morality - including, as Trotsky supposes, Christian morality.

During the first part of this article I will give an outline of Trotsky's arguments and of the liberal rejoinder contributed to *New International* by the American educationalist, John Dewey. Secondly, I will attempt a brief critical examination of the positions taken by both Trotsky and Dewey. Thirdly, I will consider the debate from the point of view of the revolutionary christians attempting to answer the question of whether there is a specifically christian approach to revolutionary morality.

Trotsky begins his article by lumping together "Messrs. Democrats, Social Democrats, Anarchists and other representatives of the left camp" who, instead of addressing themselves "to triumphant reaction" reserved their moral strictures for those "revolutionists suffering under its persecution". Trotsky identifies the class basis of "this false and pompous sermon" as the "intellectual

petit-bourgeoisie". The political basis in "their impotence and confusion in the face of approaching reaction" and the "psychological basis" in "their effort at overcoming their feeling of inferiority through masquerading in the beard of the prophet".

The "moralising philistine" (Trotsky's term for the intellectual petit-bourgeoisie) lumps together as twin evils both the conduct of reaction and the conduct of revolution. Czarism is twinned with Bolshevism, Jesuitism with Bolshevism, Trotskyism with Stalinism. All these analogies ignore the class basis and historic roles of each of these movements and classify them according to quite accidental outward similarities. "Thus to the Roman Pope, Freemasons and Darwinists, Marxists and Anarchists are twins because all of them sacrilegiously deny the Immaculate Conception". So too to "Hitler, liberalism and Marxism are twins because they do not bow before universal suffrage". However, says Trotsky, the historical process does not exhaust itself either in universal suffrage, blood and honour, or the Immaculate Conception. Trotsky concedes that classes in conflict with each other may use similar means, but does not find this surprising – "were there nothing in common in their methods of struggle they could not inflict blows upon each other".<sup>3</sup>

Trotsky sees the "democratic moralists" who are criticising him as commentators marooned by their class background and political cowardice between the opposing forces of left and right. "More than anything moralists wish that history should leave them in peace with their little books, little magazines, subscribers, common sense and moral copy-books. But history does not leave them in peace. It cuffs them now from the left, now from the right".

In the next section Trotsky considers the charge of Bolshevik "amoralism", "the so-called Jesuitical maxim of Bolshevism": "the end justifies the means". That since "the Trotskyists do not recognise the principles of morality there is consequently no principled difference between Trotskyism and Stalinism".

Trotsky counters this by asking the source of moral principles that depend upon "criteria outside of historical society" and concludes that "The theory of eternal morals can in no wise survive without God". For Trotsky, "Heaven remains the only fortified position for operations against dialectical materialism".

The next section on the similarity between Bolsheviks and Jesuits is perhaps of particular interest to Christian readers. Like the Bolsheviks four hundred years later the Jesuits had been accused of moral relativism. Evincing a grudging admiration for Jesuits, Trotsky contends that this doctrine was "maliciously attributed to the Jesuits by their Protestant and partly Catholic opponents who were not shy in choosing the means for achieving

*their own ends*". However, what the Jesuits really held was "that the moral justification or condemnation of the given means flows from the end. Thus shooting is itself a matter of indifference: shooting a mad dog that threatens a child – a virtue; shooting with the aim of violation or murder – a crime".

Trotsky contrasts Jesuitism with Anglo-Saxon utilitarianism. Apparently eschewing Jesuit moral relativism for "another seemingly higher moral" in which each 'means' carries its own tag, like merchandise with fixed prices in a department store" utilitarianism exalts Jeremy Bentham's principle of the "greatest possible good for the greatest possible number" – another form of the maxim that the end justifies the means. But Trotsky asks "what justifies the end? In practical life as in the historical movement the end and the means constantly change places".

The bourgeois evolutionism of Herbert Spencer tries to dissolve concrete historical morality in biological social instincts. Shrinking from acknowledgement of the reality of class struggle, the pursuit of the happiness serves not the interests of the majority but of the capitalist class.

Thus "whoever does not care to return to Moses, Christ or Mohammed: whoever is not satisfied with historical hodge-podges must acknowledge that morality is a product of social development: that there is nothing immutable about it; that it serves social interests; that these interests are contradictions; that morality more than any other form of ideology has a class character".

This does not mean that Trotsky recognised no general moral principles whatever. These derive from membership of society. In normal circumstances, the killing of an individual is proscribed – but in situations of self-defence, or in time of war the precept is waived. General moral precepts then are purely abstract – when they are related to concrete instances the antagonistic character of class interests is revealed. The bourgeois appeal to a moral standard above sectional class interest is not simply mistaken it is "a necessary element in the mechanics of class deception".

Trotsky goes on to argue how during the economic upsurge preceding the Great War when the material circumstances of many workers were genuinely improved "certain elementary moral precepts in social relations were established along with the norms of democracy and the habit of class collaboration".

The Great War exposed the fragile basis of this deception and the lesson was underlined later by the rise of fascism and of Stalinism – each of them according to Trotsky a product in its own way of imperialist turpitude. "Idealistic Philistines" as Trotsky calls his liberal and libertarian critics, hanker after the return of the pre-1914 era of class collaboration and the morality of common sense. "They do not understand that morality is a function of

the class struggle”.

Trotsky then turns to the dismal blindness of liberal opinion to the bloodthirsty reality of repression in Stalinist Russia and contrasts this with the moral censure and collusion in persecution which the same liberals reserve for the left opposition. For Trotsky, Stalinism – which he calls “a single clot of all monstrosities of the historical state, its most malicious caricature and disgusting grimace” – this Stalinism is occasioned not by the moral failure of Bolshevism but by “concrete historical struggle – the struggle of a new aristocracy against the masses that raised it to power”.

Dealing with specific charges against the Bolsheviks, Trotsky turns to the question of the use of subterfuge and lies and to the question of hostages and reprisals against hostages. Trotsky maintains that lies and violence are basic ingredients of a class society and “the revolution is a product of class society and of necessity bears its traits”.

Trotsky claims that few hostages were shot during the Civil War but does not rest his case upon this. Indeed he considers that greater severity might have saved more lives. The taking of hostages in 1919 was justified by the circumstances of a civil war in which the very survival of the workers’ state was at issue. Trotsky draws a parallel with Lincoln’s conduct of the American Civil War and says “A slave owner who through cunning and violence shackles a slave in chains and a slave who through cunning and violence breaks the chains – let not the contemptible eunuchs tell us they are equal before the court of morality”.

On the question of Lenin’s defence of subterfuge, Trotsky points out this was defended only in order to infiltrate anti-communist trade unions. Trotsky exposes the bogus moral sensitivity of objections to such subterfuge by reminding his readers that “every pious bourgeois applauds the cleverness of the police who succeed through craftiness in seizing a dangerous gangster”, and asks whether “military craftiness” is really not permissible when the question concerns “the gangsters of imperialism”. Trotsky concludes his defence of Lenin by arguing that the alleged “amoralism of Lenin, that is his rejection of supra-class morals, did not hinder him from remaining faithful to one and the same ideal throughout his whole life: from devoting his whole being to the cause of the oppressed: from displaying the highest conscientiousness in the sphere of ideas and the highest fearlessness in the sphere of action: from maintaining an attitude untainted by the least superiority to an ‘ordinary’ worker, to a defenceless woman to a child”. “Does it not seem” Trotsky asks “that amoralism in the given case is only a pseudonym for higher human morality?” This passage illustrates precisely the apparent ambiguity about the Marxist attitude to morality. It seems on the one hand to by-pass

morality subsuming any and every ethical norm to the exigencies of the class war, but it is only able to do this by making the class war itself into *the* great ethical enterprise. However, this does not mean that any means whatever can be adopted in the cause of the class war. In the last section Trotsky emphasises the dialectical relationship between means and ends.

“A means can be justified by its end. But the end in its turn needs to be justified” and “the end is justified if it leads to increasing the power of man over nature and to the abolition of the power of man over man”, and “that is permissible. . . which really leads to the liberation of mankind. Since this end can only be achieved through revolution, the liberating morality of the proletariat of necessity is endowed with a revolutionary character. It irreconcilably counteracts not only religious dogma but all kinds of idealistic fetishes, these philosophical gendarmes of the ruling class”.

Dewey, in his reply from the liberal point of view of a pragmatist philosopher, argues that in this dialectic of means and ends Trotsky includes in the justifying end not only the *final* justifying end of “the increasing of the power of man over nature” and “the abolition of the power of man over man” but that he also proposes the means to that end, for marxists the class struggle, as an absolute social law. For Dewey the necessity of class struggle and social revolution is *not* self-evidently the only road to the increasing of man power over nature and he fears that it is the class struggle rather than the professed end which determine the means which Trotsky is prepared to condone.

Unfortunately in the remaining months of his life Trotsky did not find time to reply directly to Dewey’s arguments. Trotsky had accused the liberal philosophers of a cowardly attempt to offer a disguised religious morality, “a morality above class leads to the acknowledgement of a special substance, of a moral sense, conscience, some kind of absolute which is nothing more than the philosophically cowardly pseudonym for God”.

Dewey, as a liberal philosopher, denies any such covert theological motives and agrees with Trotsky that “the end, in the sense of the consequences, provides the only basis for moral ideas and action”, and in his turn Dewey accuses Trotsky of a quasi-religious moral dogmatism by the elevation of class struggle to the status of an absolute social law. Now it seems to me that George Novack (the American Trotskyist) is correct in saying that Dewey fails to comprehend the Marxist understanding of the way in which class ends “are objectively woven into the very texture and structure of social existence under certain historical circumstances”. In this particular debate it is evident that Trotsky was correct and Dewey mistaken but I want to move on to certain questions from the debate between Liberal and Marxist morality which propose

themselves to christians involved in the struggle for socialism.

Both Dewey and Trotsky accept the same ultimate goals of the liberation of mankind: of increasing man's power over nature and of abolishing the power of man over man. All christians both liberal and revolutionary would presumably share these goals and identify them as the object of their prayer "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will be done on earth as it is in heaven". Both Trotsky and Dewey regard religious absolutes as providing other criteria for the determination of particular moral decisions.

The way in which Trotsky lumps together Moses, Christ and Mohammed makes clear that he sees no essential difference between the heteronomous legalism of accepting the Mosaic law or the Koran and the christian acceptance of love and openness to the Kingdom of God as the only absolute guiding principle to human behaviour. For Trotsky "in divine revelation the priests long ago discovered infallible moral criteria" but for modern christian moralists the status of infallible moral criteria is very much in question precisely because of the recognition of the secular, historical and social context of even the most infallible judgements either of Scripture or of the teaching Church. That Jesus forbade the taking of an oath, that St Paul condoned slavery and the subjection of women, that the medieval Church condemned usury or the waging of undeclared war, that Pius IX condemned freedom of worship or that Pius XI regarded contraception as a sin; all these moral judgements or attitudes at one time carried decisive authority. All have been subjected, rightly or wrongly, to refinements, corrections, or downright rejection by christians of a later age. Whether in particular cases theologians have been correct in this revisionist task depends in general not upon how solemnly or definitively a law was defined but upon whether it still speaks to the same historical or social situation.

Crude situation ethics is incorrect not because it sits lightly to eternal norms decreed by God, but because it fails to discern the dialectical relationship between means and ends. Christian morality then is not a morality of eternal laws, or of muddling through with a view to the exigencies of particular situations. It is a morality of openness to the Kingdom of God -- a transcendent reality to be fully revealed as God's gift at the conclusion of human history, but at the same time proleptically present in the mission and achievement of Jesus the Liberator.

This Kingdom, this Jesus, is the Sacrament of man's final liberation, of man's final domination of nature and of the final abolition of man's domination of man. As such it represents the final NO of God to all institutionalised violence, alienation and exploitation. Of itself it offers no political programme beyond the impossibility of acquiescence in the present situation. But for those chris-

tians who make common cause with revolutionary marxism the kingdom represents their understanding of what man must always move towards but will never entirely achieve. A prescription for the permanent revolution where even the classless society will be in a dialectical relationship with what God is offering, has offered, to man.

The Kingdom of God has nothing in common with Hegel's Absolute which implied a metaphysical consolidation rather than a permanent contradiction of the structures of domination in a class society. The Kingdom is no static philosophical abstraction, at the end of history but a dynamic personal reality already incarnated in history in the person of Jesus Christ.

Manifestly this vision is not a Marxist one. It is an additional perspective comparable in many ways to the additional perspective of any christian who prepares for the coming of the Kingdom of God within the context of a secular scientific discipline in a world that has learned to do without God. To hold this faith and at the same time to apply the method of dialectical Marxism involves the acceptance of a contradiction. A contradiction which must be accepted and lived with. For the christian, Marxism can never be the final explanation of man but it provides sufficient explanation of man for the abolition of class society and the inauguration of genuine human history. The revolutionary christian sees the class struggle as a necessary means to the liberation of man within history and as such he does not need specifically theological moral criteria for the conduct of that struggle. Properly applied the principles of historical materialism need not conflict with christian moral perspectives.

Trotsky excludes those means which do not serve a genuine revolutionary goal. He rejects those methods which involve the deception of the masses or the replacement of mass movements by individual terrorism or trust in charismatic leaders. His acceptance of the relationship between the means used and the end achieved provides sufficient basis for the discussion of every political or moral question – remembering that it is an ideological device to divorce moral from political considerations. How this works out in each case in practice is not clear. The polemical character of these two essays makes for exciting reading but can easily become a source of irritation for the academic moral philosopher. More seriously the essays suffer from a one-sidedly apologetic tone. Trotsky is so incensed by what he regards as the dishonesty of his opponents that he adopts a totally apologetic tone (similar perhaps to Paul writing Galatians). It is understandable that he should make no concessions in his theoretical position, what is more alarming is his apparent blindness even to the possibility that he or Lenin ever made any serious errors in the practice of their revolutionary



morality. On his account of the conduct of the Bolsheviks during the Civil War his case seems to be watertight. Whether he is ignorant or deliberately disingenuous about the extent of the butchery and torture used by the Cheka is a matter for historians. He does not explicitly discuss the use of torture, indeed he does not advert to it, neither does he advert to the wholesale executions without trial recorded in Serge's *Autobiography of a Revolutionary*.

As I say this is a historical question. When placed beside the apparently generous and humanitarian treatment of opponents by less correct Marxists like Guevara or Mao, the Bolsheviks only suffer by comparison, but the basic principles outlined in this essay provide the proper framework for the discussion of such questions. The moral sensitivity of Rosa Luxemburg was rooted in the same dialectical principles as those of Trotsky. Trotsky provides a basic perspective on the relationship between ethics and revolution but he fails to develop his argument in a detailed or satisfactory way. Ultimately all discussion about morality takes place in the limited context of a particular vision of man. The relation between Christian moral theology and Marxist political morality can only be situated in a fuller discussion of their respective views of man.

- 1 Both of Trotsky's articles are re-published in the collection *Their Morals and Ours, Marxist Versus Liberal Views on Morality, Four Essays by Leon Trotsky, John Dewey and George Novack*, New York, 1969. Page references refer to this edition.
- 2 This position was examined recently in two articles by Denys Turner in *New Blackfriars*, the journal of the English Province of the Dominican Order (*Morality is Marxism*, *New Blackfriars*, Vol 54 1.57 and 11.117) Oxford, England.
- 3 *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, London 1972 pp 79-94.