

Leon Trotsky: Where is Britain Going?

We often hear the words “the special crisis of British capitalism” thrown about. Currently, capitalism is finding itself in a general, world-wide crisis. The “recovery” since the 2008 slump has everywhere been anaemic. In Britain, however, in contrast to other wealthy capitalist nations, this has been compounded by a complete dearth of investment, the resulting *fall* in productivity, and the financialisation of the economy.

In this rich pamphlet, Leon Trotsky explains - among other things - where this special crisis comes from. Under these circumstances, Britain has been transformed, from one of the most stable countries in Europe to one of the most unstable. With the class struggle on the upsurge, understanding the main features of Britain’s historical development is now more important than ever before.

Britain’s Development

The ground for Britain’s development was prepared by the political revolution brought about during the English Civil War, when the ascending bourgeoisie, expressing itself through parliament and puritanism, decisively broke the power of absolutism. The Industrial Revolution of the 18th century catapulted Britain into a globally hegemonic position.

Trotsky charts this breathtaking development: “Britain emerged from her civil war and Cromwell’s dictatorship [in the 17th century] as a small nation numbering hardly 1,500,000 families. She entered the 1914 imperialist war as an empire containing within its frontiers a fifth of humanity.”

However, this entirely “natural” development of capitalism turned into its opposite because British industry was entirely unplanned and chaotic. Therefore, by the end of the 19th century, she was overtaken on the world stage by rising powers like Germany and the USA, who learned in the “industrial school” of Britain and avoided these mistakes. This inaugurated the long period of Britain’s industrial decline - which we are still experiencing - and with it a new atmosphere of instability, ferment, and class struggle that gave birth to the Labour Party, while simultaneously the Liberal Party fell apart.

This loss of competitiveness expressed (and still expresses) itself through chronic unemployment and the low profitability of British industry. This gave a powerful impetus to the financialisation of the economy, when the capitalists discovered they could make more money by investing in stocks and shares instead of the real economy. This period also marked the beginning of the end for the British empire. The capitalists became increasingly unwilling or unable to grant concessions like they used to. “What is necessary now is not threats of revolution but revolution itself.”

Discussion Questions

- What were the political and economic bases for the development of British capitalism? Which came first? Are there any lessons about the fight for socialism we can draw from this?
- How did British capitalism’s great advantage - that it was the “first kid on the block” - change into a disadvantage?
- What is the theory of uneven and combined development, and how can it help us understand the industry in countries like Germany and the USA surpassed Britain’s?

- What are the economic expressions of the “special crisis” of British capitalism, and why is this?
- Why did Marx think the Liberal would absorb the Conservative Party, and why didn't this happen?
- Why did the Liberal Party fade into insignificance, and how did this process play out?
- Why were “the most radical elements in the [1920s] British labour movement [...] most often natives of Ireland or Scotland”?
- Under what circumstances is “the bourgeois fear of revolutions” not a “progressive” factor?

“Gradualism” and revolution

Because of Britain's extraordinary position in world history, her development since the Civil War had been characterised by a certain “gradualness”, with few large-scale “sharp turns and sudden changes”, at least internally; at least apparently. The bourgeois, and with them the reformists, self-servingly attempt to turn this special process into a general theory, the theory of gradualism. In answering the arguments and dissecting the theory, Trotsky explains also how the dialectic of quantity and quality plays out on a historical scale. He also provides an eloquent defence of revolution in general, and the Russian revolution in particular.

In nature as in human history, gradual, quantitative change is always temporary, and lays the basis for “catastrophic”, qualitative developments. The two complement each other: “The long process of competition between the two states *gradually* prepares the war, the discontent of exploited workers *gradually* prepares a strike, the bad management of a bank *gradually* prepares bankruptcy.” At the same time, a qualitative transformation prepares the ground for a new period of gradual change.

The Conservatives, but also and in particular the Fabians, are prone to bemoaning the “violence” of revolution and qualitative change, but “one has to take the world as it is.” All history is characterised by revolutions representing qualitative breaks in the situation. It has been a while since Britain's last revolution, but nevertheless its development was heavily influenced by revolutionary movements in continental Europe, and even in America.

And of course, we must not forget that the basis for the “gradual” development of Britain was forged by Cromwell's “heavy military hammer, on the anvil of civil war”. What was considered Britain's “national character” in the twentieth century, being “businesslike, devout, economical, hard-working and enterprising”, had only three centuries prior shattered the “national character” of the idle aristocracy.

Having done so, over the course of the succeeding centuries, these revolutionary characteristics - as well as revolutionary protestantism - became conservative, in the same measure as the working class entered the scene. And let's not forget it didn't always do this “gradually”, even in Britain! The revolutionary movement of Chartism is testament to this.

Finally, Trotsky shows that the very basis for “gradualism” at home is “an uninterrupted succession of wars, directed at extending her arena of exploitation, removing foreign riches, killing foreign commercial competition, and annihilating foreign naval services”, in short, the violence Britain rained on the entire world.

“The British governing classes managed to avoid revolutionary shocks within their country insofar as they were successful at increasing their own material power by means of wars

and shocks of all sorts in other countries. In this way did they gain the possibility of restraining the revolutionary indignation of the masses through timely, and always very niggardly, concessions. [...] The very history of Britain testifies in practice that “peaceful development” can only be ensured by means of a succession of wars, colonial acts of violence and bloody shocks.”

Discussion Questions

- Why is the idea of “gradualism” very useful to the bourgeoisie?
- What is the relationship between the level of development of a capitalist economy and the relative ease or difficulty the working class will encounter when it attempts to overthrow the bourgeoisie? And how does this relate to the prospects for socialist construction after power has been conquered?
- How was the “gradual” development of British capitalism (insofar as it was gradual) achieved?
- What are examples of Britain’s development - internally and externally - being interrupted by qualitative, “catastrophic” change?
- What was the material basis for Britain’s “national character”?

The Labour Party

Trotsky also discusses the contradictions within the Labour Party. Here is a party rooted in the working class like few others. Rather than by socialist or Marxist intellectuals (like, for instance, the German, and even the Russian Social Democracy), it was founded by the trade unions, those “purely class organisations of wage labour [...] against capital”.

This was not an easy process: many trade union bureaucrats were happy to keep working with the Liberals. They “imagined for decades that an independent workers” party was the gloomy privilege of continental Europe.” Owing to their dominant position in the world market, the British bourgeoisie was able to stay exceptionally united, and bribe the “labour aristocracy”, granting them a privileged position. However, with the loss of this position, the bourgeoisie became incapable of doing so any longer. They became uncertain; ferment began to develop within the ruling class, and inevitably this had an effect on the working class.

The rank and file workers began applying intense pressure to their leadership in response to the attacks the ruling class was forced to carry out due to the relative decline of their standing on the world stage. It was this that caused the trade union officialdom to break with the bourgeoisie.

Despite these deep roots in the working class, the Labour Party came to be led by the Fabians, whose programme expresses Britain’s “national traditions of “love of freedom”, world supremacy, cultural primogeniture, democracy and Protestant piety”. Like all those who claim to go “beyond Marx”, the Fabians in actual fact end up resurrecting the ideas of pre-Marxist socialists like Robert Owen, but on a dramatically lower level.

The inadequacy of Labour’s leadership, is another result of the pressure the British ruling class was able to bring to bear on the Labour movement like few other ruling classes could. In this lies the “political art of the British bourgeoisie”. In fact, this is what has allowed it to maintain its rule for so long. As Trotsky says, no class can hold power through violence alone. The working class forms the vast majority of society. In order to prevent it from taking

power, it must be confused and deceived. The ruling class do this by transmitting their ideas throughout society, employing to this end the universities, the billionaire press, and also its agents in the Labour movement, the Fabians and reformists.

“They are the main prop of British imperialism and of the European, if not the world bourgeoisie. Workers must at all costs be shown these self-satisfied pedants, drivelling eclectics, sentimental careerists and liveried footmen of the bourgeoisie in their true colours. To show them up for what they are means to discredit them beyond repair. To discredit them means rendering a supreme service to historical progress. The day that the British proletariat cleanses itself of the spiritual abomination of Fabianism, mankind, especially in Europe, will increase its stature by a head.”

Discussion Questions

- What other movements - historical or contemporary - can you think of which see their task as “service to the people” like the Fabians? Does it tend to work? What distinguishes Bolshevism from this?
- With all the - justifiably - harsh words Trotsky has for the Labour Party’s leadership, why do we still work in it?
- How does Labour’s left wing today compare to the Fabians of Trotsky’s times? Who are the Fabians’ descendants in the current Labour Party?
- What conclusions can we draw from the fact that the Fabians ended up supporting New Labour?
- What lessons does the founding of the Labour Party hold for the political situation in America today?

Revolutionary Force

Trotsky then goes on to answer the pacifists, who “do not believe in force”, under any circumstances. First of all, he points out that “Not believing in force is the same as not believing in gravity”, that is, force is an inevitable part of social relations, whether we like it or not, and “to renounce liberating force amounts to supporting the oppressors’ force, which today governs the world.”

Trotsky explains, then, that many social relationships which seem non-violent to a liberal Briton are, in fact, founded on force: the organised force of the state in the form of the police and the army, and the violence inflicted on Britain’s colonial subjects. In the metropolis, a tight lid is kept on democracy by means such as restrictions on the voting age and gerrymandering.

However, with the democratic pretensions fallen away, the question of force really comes down to the proletariat’s class interest. As Marxists know, in their struggle for a better life, the highest form of which is the struggle for socialism, the working class will inevitably come into conflict with the capitalist class and its state. All history shows that the capitalists will not cede their privileges without putting up a mighty fight, using every weapon in their arsenal: the state (the police and the bureaucracy), economic war, and armed gangs in the street. This is the case just as much in individual strikes as it would be for a Labour government that really threatens the capitalists’ interests. We need only look at Britain’s miners’ strike of 1984-85 for a graphic demonstration of what this looks like, or recall when the army paraded on Heathrow airport without the Wilson government’s permission.

Thus, if we subscribe to the proletarian cause, we must be prepared to fight for it: "Is it permissible for the leaders of a general strike to form their own militias for the defence of the strikers against acts of force and for disarming and dispersing the fascist bands?" It is, of course, not just permissible, but the duty of labour's leaders to ensure that a strike is successful, and given the potential for violent resistance to any struggle which promises to substantially improve the working class' lot (and hence which really threatens the bourgeoisie's privileges), "whoever renounces force must renounce struggle as a whole, that is to say, he must in practice join the ranks of the supporters of ruling class victory." In fact, the bolder the working class' leadership, the less force will be required for its victory. The labour movement's reformist leaders do not understand this, and therefore pose a great threat to the working class' victory.

"One cannot lull the masses day in and day out with claptrap about a peaceful, painless transition to socialism and then at the first solid punch on the nose summon the masses to an armed response. This is the surest way of assisting reaction in the rout of the proletariat. To prove equal to a revolutionary repulse, the masses must be ideologically, organizationally and materially prepared for it. They [...] must be educated and tempered in a revolutionary way." Marxist leadership is required.

Discussion Questions

- What attitude should revolutionary socialists take towards parliament? If we cannot use it to achieve socialism, in which ways is it nevertheless helpful?
- What "democratic" arguments against the use of force might reformists make, and in which ways do they not hold up?
- What sort of tactical considerations might workers' leaders have to take into account when it comes to the use of force?
- What means will the capitalists use to fight against a left-wing Labour government? What countermeasures will such a government have to take if it is to withstand these attacks?

The Lessons of Britain's Revolutionary History

The English Civil War in the middle of the 17th century represented, really, the world's first bourgeois revolution. As such, it is an instructive period to study, as it reveals both the methods the bourgeoisie used to gain power (which they now disavow and want to withhold from the working class), and sheds light on the dynamics of revolution more generally.

The Civil War was a struggle between the House of Commons, elected by a severely restricted franchise, and King Charles I. The Commons "represented the nation in that it represented the bourgeoisie and thereby national wealth". In the lead-up to the Civil War, its royalist faction split off. In general, as the conflict progressed, parliament went through a convulsive series of splits and expulsions, until only a rump remained, and power is in the hands of Cromwell and the New Model Army, which had "gradually concentrated in its ranks all the most active, courageous and resolute elements", that is, the most revolutionary people which could be found.

Thus, Cromwell's power rested on "his bold solution to the fundamental tasks of the revolution." He gave expression to "the dictatorship of a class which was, moreover, the only one capable of liberating the kernel of the nation from the old shells and husks." The working

class of Britain and really the world over can learn a great deal from this great bourgeois revolutionary's determination to go to the end in pursuit of the revolution's demands.

Discussion Questions

- What can we learn from the English revolution (Civil War) about situations where there are competing claims to legitimacy? How is this question really decided?
- What parallels can we draw between the Puritans, Cromwell, and the New Model Army on the one hand, and revolutionary socialists (as exemplified by the Bolsheviks and the Red Army) on the other?
- How does the struggle of a progressive class to shatter the reactionary state express itself in revolutionary periods?

The Trade Unions and Class Discipline

Taking as his starting point the trade unions' right to demand a "political levy", that is, a contribution to the Labour Party's funds from their members, Trotsky discusses the methods of struggle adopted by the trade unions. That they should be able to demand such levies, or discipline in a strike, from their members, disregarding, to a certain extent, their individual personal preferences, is integral to the struggle for a better life for the working class as a whole.

As the capitalists understand very well, building a party and electing MPs costs a lot of money; if the Labour Party is to represent the interests of the working class, those are the pockets where that money must come from. If workers opt out of this, or break a strike, they are acting against the interests of their class. The converse of this is that any worker's "individual freedom", through the medium of the trade union will in the final count gain incomparably more than it loses."

Therefore, when the bourgeoisie tries to prevent the trade unions from imposing discipline and class solidarity in the name of "individual liberty", this is really nothing else than the "striving to disarm the workers materially, and thereby shackle them to the bourgeois parties." This cannot be allowed to happen. "The working class has the right and the duty to set its own considered class-will above all the fictions and sophisms of bourgeois democracy."

Discussion Questions

- What do liberal principles such as "individual freedom" or the "right to work" amount to in reality?
- What does it tell us about the Bolshevik Party that the trade unions' methods of struggle and discipline are hysterically (and, as Trotsky asserts, with a degree of merit) declared "Bolshevik" by the liberals?
- Instead of the "ideal British citizen", what does British society actually look like?
- What should the approach of Marxists be to workers' trade union membership?
- In what periods do the trade unions tend to enter into crisis and why?
- What role do the trade unions have to play in the socialist revolution?

The Development of the ILP and the Tasks of the Communists

In the last chapter, Trotsky briefly analyses the processes which led to the ILP placing itself at the head of the Labour Party, and uses this to outline the tasks of the communists in the coming British revolution.

The ILP started as a small propaganda organisation. When the Labour Party was founded, the ILP played a role in this, which gave it a certain level of respect among the workers. Together with the fact that the ILP reflected faithfully the attitudes of the trade union bureaucrats, this allowed them to place themselves at the head of the Labour Party.

This forced the Fabians of the ILP to become concrete. They swiftly became social-imperialists. Refusing to break with capitalism, they provide no answer to the fundamental problems faced by the working class. Inevitably, this led to the development of a left opposition to their leadership.

It is from this that the communists must set out. All the residual illusions the working class may have in Liberalism will be shattered. A communist organisation, likewise starting as a small propaganda circle, will in time, on the basis of events, be able to win the leadership of the working class away from the reformists. It is not the reformists leading the Labour Party that the workers look to, but the Labour Party itself, their own creation. Just like the ILP was able to draw on the respect it had gained by building the labour movement, the communists must likewise be seen to actively participate in the labour movement, and be its most energetic fighters. In contrast to the ILP, which accommodated itself to the conservative trade union bureaucracy, the communists will take a leading position in the labour movement (and hence its party) by waging an implacable struggle against this bureaucracy.

Trotsky's concluding remarks should inspire us as we undertake the task the Communist Party ultimately failed to complete a hundred years ago: "The destiny of the British proletariat in this struggle will be linked with the destiny of all mankind. The whole world situation and the role of the British proletariat in production and in society will guarantee its victory – on condition there is a correct and resolute revolutionary leadership. The Communist Party must develop and come to power as the party of proletarian dictatorship. There are no ways around this."

Discussion Questions

- What is "War Capitalism"? How does it differ from socialism? What are its limits?
- Why do the capitalists struggle against high unemployment benefits?
- What is centrism? Under what conditions does it arise? Is it a sustainable ideology for a mass party?
- Why are neither protectionism nor free trade feasible options for British capitalism?
- In what way did the "deep swing to the left of the British working class" cause the ILP's "manifest swing to the right"?
- What lessons can communists in Britain draw from the rise of the ILP to the head of the Labour Party?
- What does Trotsky mean when he says that "the political and financial opportunities to do this [pay for expropriations] will never coincide"?