GRAMSCI AND TROTSKY IN THE SHADOW OF STALINISM

The Political Theory and Practice of Opposition

Emanuele Saccarelli

Translated by Adrian Jackson
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To Mamma and Nonna, who do not approve
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Labor, even of the most wretchedly solitary kind, is always social. John Locke was a flamboyantly bourgeois thinker, and yet he understood this very well. Every simple object that appears on the market (in this case a pile of ink-stained paper sheets) is not the result of the efforts of a single producer, but the culmination of a long and mysterious chain of social labor that involves many, sometimes unsuspecting people. Labor is always social. But there is no compelling reason to think of it as the steady accumulation of positive contributions to the same goal, particularly in certain environments.

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do want thank her from my heart.
Chapter One

Introduction

Enter Stage Left, Gramsci and Trotsky

And who can still say, “I am a Marxist”?\(^1\)  

The Bolsheviks are compromised, discredited, and crushed. More than that . . . their teaching has turned out to be an irreversible failure, and has scandalized itself and its believers before the world and for all time.\(^2\)  
Editorial page of Zhivoe slovo, July 1917.

This book addresses a particular period in the historical development of Marxism in order to make sense of its contemporary impasse, both as a strand of political theory and as a living political tradition. Specifically, I focus on the theoretical and political legacy of two important Marxist figures, Antonio Gramsci and Leon Trotsky, using their compelling and tragic stories to provide a concrete historical account of the rise of Stalinism in the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s. Through this account, I theorize Stalinism as the complex, disastrous, and by no means inevitable outcome of a political struggle in the international communist movement in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. I also assess the relative merits of Gramsci and Trotsky’s analyses of Stalinism, a phenomenon that not only disrupted the established theoretical framework of Marxism, but also served as a challenge and imperative to develop it further. In this sense, my book is a work of political theory understood as the historical study of political ideas. Stalinism, however, is not a largely extinguished phenomenon of mere historical interest. I argue that Stalinism casts a long, though in many cases undetected shadow over various contemporary academic attempts to revitalize—as well as attempts to overcome—Marxism. While these attempts operate largely at the level of theory, much of their force and animating impulses derive from a deeply entrenched common sense about the Russian Revolution and its inevitable totalitarian
degeneration. In this introduction I begin by situating the project in the con-
temporary political and intellectual context. I then discuss the choice to focus
on Gramsci and Trotsky, and offer a few methodological reflections to explain
my approach in the context of the existing protocols of political theory.
Finally, I will provide a schematic account of the structure of the book.

I. POLITICAL AND INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

In an apparently paradoxical turn, the end of the cold war has marked the
resurgence of academic as well as popular interest in Marx’s writings. Since
then, the New York Times, the New Yorker, U.S. News & World Report, and
even the Wall Street Journal have published articles on Marx that appreci-
ated, albeit reluctantly and in a politically qualified manner, the histori-
cal significance and continued relevance of his ideas to the understanding
of our world.3 Similarly, many ambitious and influential academic works,
such as Dipesh Chakrabarty’s Provincializing Europe and Empire by Michael
Hardt and Antonio Negri, have called attention to the importance of Marx’s
thought—although, as in the case of the Wall Street Journal, in their own
peculiar ways.4

This revival of interest in Marx is a curious development. The fall of
the Soviet Union, widely interpreted as incontrovertible proof of the failure
of the socialist project, could well have resulted in the permanent shelving of
Marx’s works. Instead, rather than exorcising the specter of Marx once and
for all, the end of the cold war seems to have merely shaken the conceptual
framework that regimented the uses and readings his works. Released from
the grip of Stalinism on one hand, and dogmatic anticommunism on the
other, seemingly no longer bound to an immediate, credible political refer-
ent, be it a party or a state, Marx’s legacy appears now more than before as an
open question.

This is not, one should hasten to say, necessarily a good thing. This new
climate could easily encourage politically detached and hopelessly eclectic
approaches. The questions raised by Marx’s legacy are now even more likely
to be put, so to speak, academically. They can be turned into a mere intellec-
tual exercise that, while more or less rigorous in its scholarly and interpretive
standards, remains completely inert in a political sense. Nor is it necessarily
desirable to make a clean break from the past. The framework imposed by
the cold war was not simply an oppressive fetter, but was itself a process
of real struggles that, while dominated by two oppressive poles, might have
featured real alternatives that were never fully suppressed nor fully pursued.
There may be no need to start from scratch and reinvent the wheel. Thus the
end of the cold war, while having a general liberating effect, is no more than a political opportunity and presents us with its own difficult questions and accounts left to be settled.

The continued interest in Marx can be attributed in part to the sheer power and richness of his works, something that even many of those who are politically unsympathetic to Marxism readily concede. But this interest must also be explained by the fact that contemporary conditions remain stubbornly bound to many of the same questions faced, explained, and fought by Marx and his political heirs. Denying these alarming conditions has become increasingly difficult as the millennial optimism of the 1990s has come to an end. To utter the slogans and promises of this period today—a “new world order,” “dividends of peace,” a crisis-free “new economy,” and, best of all, the “end of history”—is to hear the quaint and fading echoes of a hopelessly distant past. The ongoing political, military, and economic convulsions of capitalism and their severe human consequences continue to bring to the fore those old questions that were thought to have been settled once and for all by its alleged triumph.

American democracy is afflicted by a profound and prolonged political crisis. The manifold contradictions of the system—the strategic convergence of the two bourgeois parties, the dominance of money in the electoral process, the institutional straightjacket of the two-party system, the fusion of the state and corporate apparatuses—have assumed a very sharp expression since the heady days of the early 1990s. This process was punctuated by a number of dramatic events, most importantly the sordid denouement of the 2000 election, which brought to the fore the deep antidemocratic undercurrents of existing institutions. The result of this process is the effective disenfranchisement of the American population. Most significantly, despite the majority of the American people opposing the war in Iraq, the existing political establishment remains completely unable to translate this popular will into a fact.

This is not, moreover, merely a political crisis involving parties and institutions, but a more comprehensive ideological one of perspective and orientation. It affects all those forces that, in the United States and internationally, had hitherto played a plausible and passable role as alternatives to unfettered capitalism. American liberalism is in a state of terminal decay that can be measured in myriad ways. In the academic establishment, one could compare John Dewey’s attitude toward the free market with that of the late Richard Rorty, or consider Alan Dershowitz and Michael Ignatieff’s efforts to finesse the philosophically proper uses of torture in the war against terror. In the media, it can be measured by observing the change in
Bob Woodward’s activities, from his dogged and uncompromising pursuit of Richard Nixon’s lies to his calm and docile chronicling of an administration whose level of deceit and criminality is exponentially greater. Or it can be measured by the active and conscious role played by the New York Times in preparing the groundwork for the war in Iraq, as well as its embarrassingly premature celebration of the failed 2002 coup in Venezuela. This decay can even be measured in the broader realm of public intellectuals and popular culture, by observing how easily September 11 caused the political unhinging of many “sensible progressives”—from left-radicals like Christopher Hitchens down to funny-man Dennis Miller.6

Internationally, multifarious alternative capitalist models, each with its own distinctive charm—from the cradle-to-grave welfare of the Scandinavian social democracies to Japan’s promises of lifelong employment—all now appear as folkloristic episodes, deviations that are being reabsorbed into the fold of the global market and its harsh imperatives. Whether measured by the conscious and acknowledged Thatcherism of Tony Blair’s New Labour, by the ambitions of Gerhardt Schroeder’s Agenda 2010, or the radical free-market “reforms” enacted in Italy by Romano Prodi and Massimo D’Alema, European social democracy, once considered a political alternative, now lays in shambles. Third World nationalism is in no better shape, having squandered the political capital it accrued in the anti-imperialist struggles of the past. The trajectory of the Congress Party of India is instructive in this sense. This organization had been the historical vehicle of a struggle against foreign capital and domination that, regardless of its political limits, was endowed with a certain dignity. In the past two decades, however, the Congress acted as the political vanguard of free-market reform. Driving the symbolic last nail in the coffin of the Congress Party tradition, prime minister Manmohan Singh declared in his speech at Oxford that, “India’s experience with Britain had its beneficial consequences,” and that “India’s struggle for independence was more an assertion by Indians of their natural right to self-governance than an outright rejection of the British claim to good governance.”7 There are many more examples of this degeneration, from Muammar Gaddafi’s prostration before the Bush administration regarding Libya’s nuclear program, to what is left of the Palestine Liberation Organization, with its total political and financial dependence on Western imperialism. The contemporary international landscape is littered with the political carcasses of Third World nationalism, particularly those organizations and regimes that could parade as mavericks and emancipators under the military shield of the Soviet Union.

This generalized political impasse rests on a troubled economic foundation. In the American economy, the lynchpin market of world capitalism, one
finds the accumulation of significant vulnerabilities. The widely predicted run on the dollar, the complete dependence on foreign investments, the explosion of the financial, and particularly the trade deficit, the negative savings rate of the American consumers, the “outsourcing” even of service jobs, and the unprecedented “bubble” in the housing market, constitute powerful warnings of trouble to come. This may or may not signal the possibility of an impending economic crisis. In any case, the great prosperity of the Clinton era, one that in fact dispensed its blessing only to a very limited section of the population, has come to a halt, leaving in its wake only dizzying levels of social inequality. The rise of social inequality, beginning in the mid-1970s, has now reached levels last seen at the onset of the Great Depression. This is the most enduring and significant fact of economic life in the United States. Its social manifestations are legion and well documented—the tens of millions who lack medical insurance, the declining access to a university education for the lower segments of the population, etc. Indeed the political crisis sketched out above is the unsurprising outcome of the fundamental incompatibility between these levels of social inequality and democracy.

These economic troubles are not confined to the United States. Internationally, the luster of the most dynamic model of capitalist development, the “Four Tigers” of Asia, was significantly tarnished by the 1998 crisis. The condition of Central and South American countries, highlighted by the “bailout” of Mexico in 1995, and the later economic meltdown of Argentina, has put a damper on illusions about the prospect of a generalized prosperity in the absence of the Soviet threat. The economic “miracles” of India and China may be very impressive in terms of GDP growth, but appear in an entirely different light when considered from the standpoint of the rural and urban working population of those countries, and only serve to prepare future conflagrations. The social and economic impact of capitalist restoration in Russia, finally, is perhaps the most embarrassing reality that the once-eager prophets of capitalist triumph must now face with extreme discomfort—in this case, the farce, as it were, preceded the tragedy.

But the most concrete and destructive manifestations of the present difficulties are found in the realm of international relations. The ongoing events in Iraq and Afghanistan—and before that, the no less predatory (though more tactfully presented) adventures in the Balkans, Somalia and Haiti—have vanquished the hopes for a peaceful new world order. But they have also stimulated the suspicion that the old question of imperialism remains one of pressing significance. The resurgence of economic and political tension between the United States and the European countries (the Boeing-Airbus affair, the fight over agricultural subsidies, the conflict over the Iraq
war, the development in the United States of a crude antipathy toward all things French) and the many unmistakable signals sent by Japan (Junichiro Koizumi’s incendiary visits to the shrine of Japan’s war dead, and the proposed revision of Article Nine of the Japanese Constitution concerning the nature of the national armed forces) assail one’s nostrils with the familiar and unpleasant odor of chauvinism characteristic of the pre-World War I period. Indeed, it is significant that imperialism is increasingly being discussed in and around ruling circles without shame, as a positive good. From Oxford dons (Niall Ferguson), to more common foot-soldiers of the bourgeois press (the appropriately named Max Boot), to the human residue unpleasantly deposited in our times by the empires of old (Dinesh D’Souza and Deepak Lal), a remarkably shameless literature in praise of imperialism has been produced of late.9

In sum, all of the forces that had in the past made claims and attempts to resist, moderate, or modulate capitalism today show unmistakable signs of historical exhaustion. At the same time, however, even in the epoch of its alleged triumph, capitalism continues to go through terrible convulsions. Recurring economic crises, the historical incompleteness and further erosion of democracy, and, most importantly, a state of war that shows no sign of abating all suggest that the real character of the present epoch has little in common with the pervasive trumpeting that followed the end of the cold war. For these reasons, the ongoing Marx revival is at least in one sense not surprising. The gap between the severity of current conditions and the earlier expectations practically demands a second look at the tradition that provided the most forceful, radical, and comprehensive critique of capitalism and its effects. It is in this sense, incidentally, that I hope to fend off the likely prima facie objections about the untimely character of a return to Marx and his legacy. If, for whatever reason, the Wall Street Journal feels at liberty to revisit the question of Marx’s legacy, then anyone can feel safe in doing so without having to worry about knee-jerk accusations of strange or depraved belatedness. However, precisely because the Wall Street Journal is engaged in this operation, the specific character of this revival—its nature, its ends, its prospects—needs to be interrogated.

It is no exaggeration to say that many of the academic works that have attempted to revisit Marx seem intended to exorcise him. More precisely, these seem to be attempts to transcend Marx, to demonstrate his fundamental inadequacy to the challenges of our epoch, even as they pay homage to his towering intellect. The two works I have cited as examples of the academic dimension of this revival illustrate the peculiar and in some ways tendentious character of this phenomenon. In Provincializing Europe, Chakrabarty returns to Marx, but as a stepping-stone to better reach Heidegger.10
In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri summon Marx to point out the myriad ways in which he has been surpassed.\textsuperscript{11} Furthermore, to the extent that these works seek to recover positive, useful insights from Marx, they tend to do this by detaching his intellectual legacy from his political one. Many examples of this tendency could be listed, such as Terrell Carver’s *The Postmodern Marx*, Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, and Moishe Postone’s *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. In these works, we see an attempt to return to and develop a particular aspect of Marx’s thought paired with an explicit rejection of the historical experience of Marxism.\textsuperscript{12} This peculiar maneuver takes place as though the collapse of the Soviet Union had really freed Marx himself, and not just these academic authors, from an unwanted burden, so that he can finally assume his rightful place as a proper intellectual. In some cases, strenuous efforts are made to make Marx himself speak against Marxism.\textsuperscript{13} In other cases, what Marx actually said is considered to be irrelevant, leaving one to wonder exactly what the point of clinging to even a formal and conditional allegiance to him might be.\textsuperscript{14} Of course the actual political import of this literature is less than clear, sometimes even to its authors.\textsuperscript{15}

Shifting the focus of this discussion more decisively from Marx to Marxism, a move that gets us closer to the actual subject of this work, it is possible to see similarly odd academic uses and abuses of this political tradition. On the one hand, it is all too easy to detect a widespread rejection of it. For a wide array of “post-Marxisms,” encompassing cross-disciplinary trends such as poststructuralism and postcolonialism, Marxism customarily serves as a foil. The criticisms levied against it have to do with the Eurocentric character of its narrative (its insensibility to contingency and cultural specificity); the reductionism of its underlying social theory (its perceived correspondence between an economic “base” and a political and ideological “superstructure”); the determinism of its outlook (its emphasis on objective structures and processes that eliminates any room for human agency); and its scientism (its untenable pretension to examine social phenomena as one would examine the natural world). On the other hand, there is something peculiar about the way in which these trends have emerged and continue to develop out of a confrontation with the perceived deficiencies of Marxism. This seems to be less of a necessary preliminary move to clear out new ground and more of a permanent posture. In other words, if Marxism did not exist, it would be necessary for the post-Marxists to invent it.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, multifarious strands of academic thought seem intent on permanently keeping Marxism, such as they perceive it to be, in a sort of coma. Marxism is deemed to be completely inert, and yet, in a certain sense, its existence is
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considered sacred. It is tangibly present, among us, but no longer able to speak for itself. Instead, it is always spoken about by critics who are not bold or serious enough to renounce and denounce it once and for all.

Exactly what is this “Marxism” the “post-Marxists” are perpetually in the process of transcending? We are rarely told. When a demand for some specificity and precision is made to this literature, one comes away empty-handed. In most cases, “Marxism” appears as a remarkably generic and unspecified construct. An example that is especially pertinent to my work is the way in which Stuart Hall and Cornel West praise Gramsci as a sophisticated theorist of enduring significance. In doing so, they both present a remarkable contrast. Hall claims that

...”hegemony” in Gramsci’s sense requires, not the simple escalation of a whole class to power, with its fully formed “philosophy,” but the process by which a historical bloc of social forces is constructed and the ascendance of that bloc secured.17

West, in turn, in explaining his interest in Gramsci, develops an implicit comparison:

Gramsci’s work is historically specific, theoretically engaging and politically activist in an exemplary manner. His concrete and detailed investigations are grounded in and reflections upon local struggles, yet theoretically sensitive to structural dynamics and international phenomena. . . . For [Gramsci], the aim of philosophy is not only to become worldly by imposing its elite intellectual views upon people, but to become part of a social movement by nourishing and being nourished by the philosophical views of oppressed people themselves for the aims of social change and personal meaning.18

In both cases, one is compelled to ask the question, “as opposed to whom?” Just who or what is Gramsci’s concept of hegemony superior to, his mode of analysis more “historically specific” and “concrete,” and more meaningfully connected to the “people themselves?” It is not difficult to see that the answer is “Marxism.” But what is this exactly? Hall designates it as “classical” Marxism.19 But this does not advance matters very much. Does this refer to Korsch, Bordiga, Bukharin, Lenin, or Trotsky? This sort of question is not posed—certainly not in this way—because such a level of specificity is not deemed to be pertinent to the tasks at hand. “Classical” Marxism is construed to include any and all of them. Indeed in this literature, Gramsci is
Introduction

typically the only one of the “Marxists” to be rescued from this undifferentiated mass.

Understood in this way, and as shown from the passages quoted above, (classical) “Marxism” actually stands for a vulgar and crude tradition from a politically distant past. Although it is obviously passé, it remains an obligatory reference exactly in order to mark out the freshness and superiority of one’s own outlook. This orientation toward Marxism should be questioned on theoretical grounds. The differences on matters of theory among the figures that constitute Marxism are quite extensive and complex. If, pursuing Hall and West’s considerations, one were to interrogate Lenin’s texts on the question of hegemony, historical specificity, and the living quality of “philosophy,” for example, the results would be completely different than Bordiga’s ideas on these topics. Or, if one were to consider Bukharin’s understanding of hegemony, it would be necessary to draw a sharp distinction between his ideas before and after the year 1921, when this question came to be at the center of his thinking. In the process of conducting such exercises, moreover, one is likely to begin reconsidering the common assessment of Gramsci as standing head and shoulders above these other figures—beginning, for example, with the fact that Gramsci himself identified Lenin as the highest theoretician of hegemony.

As much as the self-evidence of Marxism’s supposed poverty depends on a widespread, and in many cases inherited theoretical myopia (among academics today it would be scarcely possible to find someone who believes it necessary to read Bukharin, rather than simply accept the common sense notion of classical Marxism as a gray blur of “theory”), it is also important to note that it is propped up by an implicit and powerful political judgment. Marxism stands in fact for political failure of the most conspicuous and large-scaled sort, and for a whole host of crimes against humanity. Behind the perceived theoretical dullness and deficiency stand livelier and more decisive facts, entrenched in the minds of our theorists and in the common sense of the epoch: the bread lines, the gulag, the purges, and so on.

The presence of this powerful force in most cases must be inferred. In explaining the need for his “Marxism without guarantees,” Hall speaks of the “lost dream or illusion of theoretical certainty.” But where did this final disenchantment take place? When did certainty end, and the slouching toward ambiguity, deconstruction and undecidability begin? It would be naïve to think that this occurred at the moment when an especially central conceptual confusion or logical impossibility within Marxist theory was exposed, or when certain advances in the philosophy of language took place.
Although the discourse of post-Marxism always proceeds on the plane of theory, it should not be difficult to see that the shipwreck of the communist movement, and most importantly of the Soviet Union, plays a powerful, if covert role in it.21 On this question, incidentally, we will not catch the *Wall Street Journal* equivocating. If it is possible for the bourgeois press and public to somewhat playfully reconsider Marx’s legacy, the symbols of the Soviet Union continue to haunt their imagination and induce a mood of terrible seriousness at the least provocation.22

In continuing to consider the way in which post-Marxism understands classical Marxism, it should be noted that the former does not always present the latter as a generic and unexamined construct. Occasionally, classical Marxism is examined in considerable detail before being rejected as inadequate. But even in these cases, the examination is a largely philosophical matter. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s critique of the Marxist tradition is a good example of this approach. The dimension of political practice is unreflectively subsumed and taken for granted in the account of the theoretical inadequacy of Marxism. In this way, a strictly philosophical critique is isolated from, and made to stand for, a serious assessment of the lessons of struggle in the history of the Marxist movement. The most important product of this tendency, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, is the story of the original essentialism that fatally tainted Marxism from its inception, and of the difficult philosophical flight from it, which resulted in Gramsci’s breakthrough, and more decisively and importantly in Laclau and Mouffe’s breakthrough. Their bitter exchange over the merits of post-Marxism with Norman Geras follows a similar pattern. Laclau and Mouffe’s historical account of the developments leading to post-Marxism consists of a handful of conventional remarks about the failure of the Soviet Union and a far more substantive narrative describing this philosophical escape from original essentialism.23 On this Laclau and Mouffe consistently miss the point of Geras’ critique based on the political, not philosophical, conditions of possibility of post-Marxism.

From the standpoint of my argument, Laclau and Mouffe’s version of post-Marxism, compared to Hall and West, certainly has the merit of reviewing the history, of assessing the differences between, say, Eduard Bernstein and Rosa Luxemburg, or Luxemburg and Lenin. But this variant also remains one-sided. In this case, the force of the argument, though displaced and refracted, also comes from the common sense about the political failure of Marxism. Why is it possible for Laclau and Mouffe to operate largely on the philosophical level? Precisely because this political failure is so self-evident at the political level that it need not be discussed.
II. MARXISM IN THE SHADOW OF STALINISM: GRAMSCI AND TROTSKY

Thus, whether Marxism serves as the drab and undifferentiated background on which post-Marxists can paint their theory in bright colors, or whether it is unpacked and disentangled philosophically before being set aside, the real force, the condition of possibility for these operations is the reality of the political failure of Marxism, at least as perceived by these theorists. The argument I develop in this work emerges from a desire to contest this perception. In order to do so, it is not possible to proceed starting from a revision and reinterpretation of Marx that disregards the movements and consequences that flowed from his political legacy. If, as I have attempted to explain, the debates about the contemporary standing of Marxism are substantially displaced, then an “innocent” return to Marx, however sympathetic and powerful, will not do. It will not be possible to bypass the conscious and semiconscious mental occlusions concerning the historic failure of Marxism in this way. The direction of the analysis needs to be reversed, proceeding not from Marx to us, but by tracing our steps back to him. This book will seek to recover the lost thread of Marxism at the point in which “certainty” happened to be lost: amidst the crimes and horrors of the Soviet Union’s degeneration.

In effect, the debates I have briefly reviewed take place in the presence of the proverbial elephant in the room: Stalinism. The post-Marxists pretend not to notice, in part because this problem appears to them as an excessively concrete and insufficiently “rich” as a matter of theory. More importantly, the post-Marxists ignore it because the question is already settled in their minds. Silently, efficiently, without demanding any effort on their part, Stalinism performs the work of demonstrating the necessity and righteousness of their cherished prefix. At the same time, however, the project and prospect of a revitalization of Marxism will not be effective as long as it is allowed to remain a generic and self-evident tradition and pretends that it can afford to ignore the question of Stalinism. Any reconsideration of Marxism seeking to do more than provide yet another interpretive riff on various texts must account for this reality. Marxism needs to situate itself by providing a more specific set of historical and political coordinates, spelling out concretely its relation to and its distance from the Stalinist degeneration.

Accordingly, mine is not a defense of Marxism based on its irreducible plurality. The point is not to spark interest and deflect objections by insisting that behind the single label of “Marxism” stand a multiplicity of different views. In other words, it will not do to point out that Bordiga’s political thought and practice was in fact substantially different from Bukharin’s,
unless the political salience of this difference can be demonstrated, and not just in a historical sense. With this in mind, I chose to focus on two specific figures in the pantheon of Marxism that were politically active in the period of the 1920s and 1930s, when the Stalinist degeneration occurred.

The first figure is an all too familiar one: Antonio Gramsci. The Italian communist enjoys great popularity in academia, and in this sense the choice does not need to be justified. As I have already discussed, Gramsci is the frequent, nearly obligatory stop in the typical post-Marxist trajectory. With few exceptions, the intellectuals I have discussed as part of this broad category consider Gramsci to be central to their agenda. Indeed Gramsci is an important, and in some cases indispensable, figure for a wide range of disciplinary and cross-disciplinary currents, including cultural studies, subaltern studies, postcolonial theory, cultural history, pragmatism, critical pedagogy, anthropology, international relations, and of course post-Marxism itself. My argument is predicated on the suspicion that Gramsci is popular in academia for the wrong reasons.

As already shown in the case of Hall, West, Laclau, and Mouffe, the prevailing tendency is to distill Gramsci’s theory from Marxist theory and practice—to displace Gramsci from the intellectual and political tradition to which he belonged. My argument develops in opposition this tendency. I assess Gramsci as a Marxist, seeking to discern what he offers to the revitalization, not the dismissal, of this tradition. In examining this question from the standpoint of the necessity to confront Stalinism directly, however, I also develop a critique of those who have attempted to reclaim Gramsci for the Marxist tradition. My argument begins in fact from a consideration of the inadequacy of this literature, insisting that it is not possible to make sense of Gramsci without putting the problem of Stalinism into focus. I thus explain how the process of Stalinist degeneration affected the production of Gramsci as an author in significant ways. I then reverse the direction of the analysis, using Gramsci as an entry-point into the question of the rise and consolidation of Stalinism. I pose the question of whether Gramsci was able to detect and understand Stalinism as a phenomenon, and whether his political behavior as one of the leaders of the Italian Communist Party contributed to its consolidation.

Examining the continuing significance and effects of Stalinism in this way, my work must confront certain methodological issues from the standpoint of political theory as a discipline. In a methodological sense, in confronting the difficult interpretive tasks involved in reading demanding texts, I insist on the need to understand authors as political actors, involved in a living struggle of social and political forces. The texts I examine are not a
collection of desiccated, more or less logical, more or less falsifiable propositions, but can only be understood, let alone put to use, in the context of this struggle. For example, in the next chapter I demonstrate that the process of production of Gramsci as an author, the way in which he was made available for academic consumption, was itself saturated with Stalinist erasures and distortions that continue to affect how he is put to use by contemporary academics. Subsequently, I demonstrate that beneath the generic and purely “theoretical” surface of Gramsci’s prison writings lurks a labyrinth of political warnings and judgments that is simply unintelligible without an understanding of the complex struggles that were taking place within the communist movement at that time. My work insists, in other words, on the ties that bind political theory to political practice as a methodological imperative for the task of interpretation.

The question of methodology is even more pressing in the case of Leon Trotsky, the second figure I examine in this work. This is true for the simple reason that while Gramsci is a highly regarded thinker, political theory has virtually ignored Trotsky. The problem here is in part explained by the fact that Trotsky was the victim of a process of systematic distortion and erasure of unprecedented scale, eclipsing that which affected Gramsci. In addition, the dichotomies of the cold war continued to squeeze Trotsky’s legacy out of the field of what is politically legitimate or even conceivable. Yet this process was never complete, and Trotsky’s legacy was never fully suppressed. In this sense, my work is an attempt to call attention to this tradition as a lost treasure, half-buried in the political ruins of Stalinized Marxism. More specifically, I make the case that Trotsky’s theoretical understanding of and political opposition to Stalinism constitute an important resource for the sort of revitalization of Marxism I have discussed here. From this standpoint, I suggest that while Gramsci may be useful, Trotsky is indispensable.27

Aside from the broader historical processes that obscured his legacy, the absence of Trotsky from the field of political theory must also be explained by the disciplinary parameters of political theory itself. The same type of tendencies of textual and philosophical reductionism, of political neutralization and domestication that I have already identified as characteristic of the post-Marxist approach to Marx and Gramsci, are certainly not alien to political theory. Indeed, many of the figures I discussed in this introduction—Laclau, Mouffe, Carver—find their disciplinary home in political theory. However, since there is no comparable body of academic literature devoted to Trotsky as there is for Marx and Gramsci, the process involved here is quite different. Trotsky is not the pivot for the tendentious operations of post-Marxism. He is not at the center of any tempest in academic
teapots. With few exceptions, which I will discuss in chapter four, Trotsky is simply nowhere to be found. From my standpoint the task is thus not to correct distortions, but to explain this absence and stimulate interest. At any rate, the protocols peculiar to political theory are implicated in Trotsky’s absence from the discipline in a different way.

The unwillingness on the part of political theory to recognize Trotsky as a pertinent object of study and the considerable difficulties in making a case for this reorientation have to do with the fact that he is regarded primarily as a man of political action, not theory. It is true that in this capacity he is widely recognized as a colossal historical figure—a Napoleon or a Caesar who enjoyed a similar dizzying rise to power and a tragic fall as well. Many are aware, moreover, that like Caesar and Napoleon, Trotsky wrote copiously. As far as I know, however, no one reads *The Gallic Wars* or Napoleon’s massive correspondence in a political theory class, and the same is true in Trotsky’s case. His extensive writings can no doubt appear, from the standpoint of a certain understanding of what political theory is, as too concrete, too polemical, too closely tied to the banalities of party and factional struggles. Gramsci’s political writings, as I will explain, tend to be shunned in favor of his prison notebooks for the same reasons. Only the latter are recognizably “theoretical,” exactly because they appear to be removed from the immediate political concerns of the day. Trotsky’s work suffers from the same treatment. But in his case, the problem is aggravated by the fact that Trotsky’s entire textual production consists of such theoretically unsuitable political writings. It is perfectly possible to cut Marx and Gramsci down to size from the standpoint of a specific understanding of political theory—for example, understood as political philosophy in a strict sense. But one cannot perform the same operation with Trotsky, whose ventures in philosophy were rare and hopelessly entangled in political diatribes.

This is the principal reason why political theory is under no special compulsion to recognize theoretical significance in Trotsky’s work. This is certainly the case whenever political theory insists on either the primacy or autonomy of the text, or, borrowing from the philosophy of language of John Austin and John Searle, emphasizes the necessity to understand the text in its linguistic context—its exact place amidst the totality of discursive utterances in which it circulated. In these two versions of political theory, politics tends to take a back seat. It is either eclipsed by perennial and unchanging ethical questions (Leo Strauss), or is reduced to a series of confrontations between published arguments—nothing more than a struggle among the phrases of this world (Quentin Skinner). My emphasis in what follows, instead, is on the political context revealed by the text. I approach the text, in other words,
as always pointing beyond itself, toward that chain of struggles among living social and political forces of which it is only a link, but also as a political object in its own right—something that can be hurled against an advancing enemy, sabotaged by treacherous allies, or conquered by a rival faction.

I am not trying to suggest that in a methodological sense political theory is incompatible with my approach. On the contrary, certain strands of political theory, even some that are not impossibly distant from the disciplinary mainstream, have articulated similar methodological concerns. I will mention two examples. The first is Richard Ashcraft’s critique of the Cambridge School of interpretation. I have already noted that this methodology is predicated on the importance of the linguistic context. Skinner in particular focused on what he called “illocutionary force” of a text—that is, what the author of the text understood him or herself as doing in writing it. In principle, the notion of illocutionary force could be used to stress texts as a form of conscious political action. But in fact, as Ashcraft argued, behind the sophisticated linguistic theories of the Cambridge School stood an idealist form of reductionism that tended to defuse the political charge of the text. In the culmination of his critique of J.G.A. Pocock in particular, Ashcraft states, “This, in practice, amounts to equating politics with ‘the political speech of society’ . . . [which] allows one to interpret the history of political theory as ‘a verbal tennis match’; that is, as a struggle over the forms and substance of political speech.”30 Political struggle obviously has its deliberative moments and textual forms, and to this extent, the tasks and problems of textual interpretation are a constitutive part of its study and practice. In what follows, the struggle over the meaning of Gramsci’s notebooks, for example, is an important matter, and certainly itself a particular moment of political struggle. But the production and interpretation of texts does not exhaust politics, and a reductionism of this sort is as much a failure of self-awareness about the professional deformations peculiar to academia as it is a failure of questionable methodology. In other words, we might accept as a useful reminder from Wittgenstein via Tully and Skinner the notion that “words are deeds.”31 But this should not blind us to the fact that deeds are also, and in fact most prominently, deeds.

Ashcraft also criticized what he perceived to be the disingenuous ambitions of this methodology to attain a pristine, supra-political “understanding.” He criticized, in other words, the sort of contemplative attitude toward politics and fastidiousness toward the perceived banalities of actual political struggle that in fact often conceals a definite political agenda.32 This is not incompatible with Ashcraft’s other point of criticism, in which the political theorist, or at least a particular kind of political theorist seemed ready to
reduce the politics of the past to the sorts of things he is himself accustomed to doing—explaining, writing, and publishing. The second aspect of Ashcraft’s critique concerns the way in which the political theorist understands his own interpretive efforts. It is a rejection of the pretenses of detachment of the political theorist—the attempts to present oneself as merely an expert analyst, rather than a participant in the “verbal-tennis match” of politics. If the first point of critique was that interpretation is not the only political act, the second is that that all interpretations of political texts, even when they hide behind the assurances of impartiality derived from certain techniques and methods, or the aspirations and obligations of the profession, are political acts.

Thus political theory, at least the version of it aggressively put forth by Ashcraft, can accommodate the sort of project I wish to pursue here. I find the last aspect of Ashcraft’s critique particularly useful because it seems to me to validate a particular mode of social inquiry that, in contrast with prevailing academic dispositions, is openly and fully invested in one’s political commitments. Ashcraft’s argument can be read as a defense of the legitimacy, and perhaps even the necessity, of situating one’s work of political theory in the trenches and barricades of contemporary politics. In the same way, I wish to defend the practice of conceptualizing and presenting scholarly work as a conscious, explicit political intervention that emerges from concrete political conditions. In this respect, political theory in particular would do well to renounce, rather than parrot, the posturing of its disciplinary cousins. Any methodology can be redescribed in terms of political intents and effects, and we could save ourselves some time and trouble by explaining our “biases” upfront. In my particular case, I will attempt to defend the historical record of the Marxist tradition and what I consider to be its most outstanding exponent. As a result, some will no doubt detect in the tone and content of my work an objectionable hagiographical quality. I do not deny the fact that I regard Leon Trotsky as the highest model of political conduct, a figure whose historical and political stature dwarfs the more usual cast of characters typically invited in a work of political theory. I am, moreover, convinced that in politically more mature times it will be possible and indeed advisable to do away with heroes. But we most assuredly do not live in such a time today, and, until then, we should at least try to choose the right ones.

The second example of a particular understanding of political theory that is compatible with what I attempt to do here is found in Sheldon Wolin’s “Political Theory as a Vocation.” Wolin’s purpose, unlike Ashcraft, was to mount a defense of political theory as an embattled subfield of political science in the wake of the discipline’s behavioral revolution, rather than engage in debates internal to the subfield. Nonetheless, his articulation and
defense of “epic theory” essentially echoes Ashcraft, beginning with an attack on the pretenses of a neutral and objective “methodism” that is concerned with “crises in techniques of inquiry” rather than a “crisis in the world.” Wolin’s “epic theory” refers in part to the “unusual ‘magnitudes’ of this form of theorizing,” and can also evoke the historical grandeur of its practitioners. I read this as an invitation to bring a figure like Trotsky into the fold of political theory—a matter I discuss in chapter four. From this standpoint, many aspects of Wolin’s “epic theory” are useful and suggestive. For example, Wolin argues that what distinguishes the epic theorist is the effort “by an act of thought . . . to reassemble the whole political world.” It would be difficult to point to a theorist who could match Trotsky’s capacity to examine and operate in the most varied geographic contexts—from the peculiar conditions of oppression facing black Americans to the prospects of the Chinese revolution—and to integrate so many different dimensions of the political world—from great-power diplomacy to the aesthetics of surrealism.

Furthermore, Wolin’s insistence on the “structure of intentions” implicit in epic theory—its practical disposition, its engaged, possibly even militant character, its capacity to function in and through conflict rather than seek to evade and transcend it—is an accurate description of the sort of theorizing I examine and defend here. Finally, Wolin also explains that epic theory is characterized by a respondent—though not impervious—attitude toward “facts.” It does not simply register and measure them. It refuses to bow before a tyranny of the accomplished fact and alleged final judgments issued in the name of history. This is another way in which Trotsky, with his dogged persistence in fighting long after his “decisive” political defeat at the hands of Stalinism, can be thought of as a quintessentially epic theorist.

This brief discussion of Ashcraft and Wolin is intended to show that, in principle, a certain version of political theory can accommodate the kind of approach that characterizes my book. This is true both in terms of the interpretive method employed (the demand for a closer correspondence between political theory and practice) and for the inclusion of Leon Trotsky in particular. Of course between principle and fact stand considerable obstacles, and one can hardly expect an open-armed welcome from the discipline as presently constituted. This is not, in any case, a matter of finding one’s place at the table, joining a conversation, or of other edifying metaphors for the way in which the discipline functions. Exactly because of the political charge of the version of political theory I propound, it is necessary to be clear about the fact that this is a form of struggle, and, moreover, to recognize which side is losing.

Though Ashcraft and Wolin are undoubtedly recognizable and important names, one cannot say that the kind of political theory they attempted
to articulate and defend approximates the prevailing protocols of the discipline. Ashcraft’s intervention did not prevent the Cambridge School from winning a considerable hold over questions of interpretive method and technique. At the time he wrote his article, Ashcraft was already forced to admit that his critique was directed against the “effective custodians of the tradition of political theory,” and there is little evidence that the situation has changed since then.39

Similarly, it would be difficult to argue that Wolin’s warnings have been heeded either by political science or political theory. While the fanaticism of the behavioral revolution is today at least in some ways only an unpleasant memory, political theory remains an embattled subfield, always threatened by the latest round of demands for scientific rigor. Moreover, since Wolin’s article, political theory itself has continued to suffer from its own narrowness of scope, a self-referential orientation toward its shrinking niche market, recurring attacks of “methodism,” and has remained an activity that can be characterized as political for the most part in the third order—that is, remaining engaged in a discussion about those who have discussed politics.40 The same stinging remark that Leo Strauss felt compelled to direct against political science could be thrown back at the subfield today: political theory “fiddles while Rome burns.”41

Nonetheless, where there is life there is hope, and where there is an available, reasonably important space for political struggle, there is a responsibility to engage in it. One of the most important principles associated with Marxism is that political struggle must be conducted not in the skies above, or in the world one would wish to live in, but in the one we do live in, taking advantage of available spaces as they actually exist. What follows is written in this spirit.

III. STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The first part of my work confronts the problems concerning contemporary academic uses of Gramsci. Chapter two begins by highlighting some aspects of the Marxist critique of the contemporary uses of Gramsci, in solidarity with this critique’s general thrust, but also identifying some of its limits. The rest of the chapter will offer some elements for the reconstruction of this critique on a sounder foundation. In general, these elements are predicated on the need to deal directly and critically with the degeneration of the international communist movement. I do this first by tracing some important and troubling moments of erasures and fabrications in the Italian Communist Party’s (PCI) philological stewardship of Gramsci’s legacy. I then turn to
the opposition between “Gramsci the intellectual” and “Gramsci the communist,” arguing that the project of Marxist reclamation of Gramsci cannot hinge upon this distinction without taking stock of how this dichotomy was itself the product of the PCI’s political degeneration. Finally, in chapter three I offer a more direct political assessment of Gramsci’s legacy in relation to the Stalinization of the PCI and the Third International.

The second part of my work will examine the significance of Leon Trotsky’s political theory and practice. I do this against the background of Stalinism understood not merely as a historical phenomenon, but as charged with important and neglected contemporary implications, particularly from the standpoint of the revitalization of Marxism. Against this background, having found Gramsci and his legacy wanting in important respects, I argue that Trotsky provides the more specific historical and political coordinates necessary for a revitalization of Marxism. Chapter four begins by providing a sense of the legacy and grandeur of Trotsky as a historical figure, and examines the problem and prospect of reading Trotsky’s work as political theory. It then surveys the existing literature that, on the whole, places Trotsky beyond the pale of theory and suppresses his potential uses, and considers the political and historical conditions that enable this neglect. Chapter five focuses more specifically on Trotsky’s theoretical diagnosis of and political opposition to Stalinism. I argue that on this question Trotsky was able to maintain a difficult, remarkable political balance against tremendous pressures. In so doing, Trotsky developed a sophisticated theoretical conceptualization of the long transition to socialism and its disastrous pitfalls, and built an international political movement in opposition to Stalinism. The first achievement stands as the most important advance of Marxist theory after the Russian Revolution, while the significance of the second far exceeds its hitherto modest numbers. Together, they represent an indispensable resource and obligatory passage toward the revitalization of Marxism for our times.
Part I
The Mummy, the Professor, and the Cannibal

The Contemporary Uses and the Marxist Reclamation of Antonio Gramsci
As the Soviet Union began to crumble, a new and unexpected threat seized the imagination of many right-wing commentators: Antonio Gramsci. According to Rush Limbaugh, Michael Novak, and a number of colorful websites, this long-deceased Italian was the mastermind of an intricate and ongoing conspiracy that, beginning from the centers of learning and culture, would destabilize and ultimately overthrow the capitalist order. As a still sentient General Pinochet put it in the wake of the Soviet collapse, “The doctrine of the communist Antonio Gramsci is Marxism in a new dress . . . it is dangerous because it penetrates the consciousness of the people and above all the consciousness of the intellectuals.”

Such an exciting prospect, however, was destined to remain a fantasy, for in surveying the contemporary academic uses of Gramsci one would be hard-pressed to find traces of sedition. Instead, the prevailing tendency is to distill Gramsci’s theory from Marxism, and to detach him more or less completely from the revolutionary tradition to which he belonged.

Gramsci is presented as the admirably sophisticated Western Marxist (innocent of the reductionisms of some unspecified vulgar orthodoxy), as the able theorist of the superstructure (already veering toward that cultural and linguistic turn that defines large sections of contemporary academia), or, perhaps most stunningly, as himself the theoretical ancestor of a post-Marxist turn. In doing so, this literature can at times be caught striking some embarrassing poses. An article on Gramsci’s concept on hegemony published in a leading journal in political theory, for example, states, “The politics of hegemony was not a deductive inference from class theory, but the outcome of Gramsci’s pitiless inspection of his own biography, beginning with his conflicting relation to his deformed body.”

This statement is so preposterous as to be disarming, and gives a sense of the sort of massive displacement of Gramsci’s politics that the contemporary academic uses of Gramsci can affect.
Gramsci and Trotsky in the Shadow of Stalinism

Gramscian academia stumbles badly even when it manages to pose the question of Gramsci’s politics, as in the case of Anne Showstack Sassoon’s contribution to a 1998 volume on the significance of the rise of “New Labour” in England. This well-respected scholar described Tony Blair’s government as a Gramscian “project,” and the Prime Minister himself as a contemporary Gramscian “modern prince.” Even taking into consideration Sassoon’s somewhat embarrassed qualifications and the fact that Blair was just getting started on his rightward journey, by 1998 this statement already spoke volumes about the lack of a sense of political proportions in Gramscian academics. In comparison, the insights, or at least the instincts of Limbaugh and Pinochet sparkle, for they at least continue to associate Gramsci with a revolutionary project, even if it is just a specter haunting their minds. Moreover, if one were to insist in looking for a conspiracy, the more likely candidate would be the subtle, and in some cases not so subtle attempts to appropriate Gramsci on the part of politically indifferent or hostile elements in academia.

The existence of a blossoming academic “Gramsciology,” in other words, has little to do with the political sensibilities and goals of the very object of its studies. It is no accident, for example, that many of today’s most distinguished Gramsciologists, such as Cornel West and Adam Przeworski, belong to that tradition of “democratic” and reformist socialism against which Gramsci fulminated in his lifetime. This situation, not surprisingly, has prompted some recurring attempts to rescue Gramsci from Gramsciology.

In his important essay “The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci” published in 1976, Perry Anderson called attention to the peculiar phenomenon of the “unknown” Gramsci. Anderson intervened at a time when Gramsci and what were purported to be “Gramscian” categories were beginning to rapidly circulate within Anglo-American academic discourse. Yet, as Anderson pointed out, Gramsci remained “unknown” because the extraordinary complexities of his thought were routinely bypassed by “facile or complacent readings” of his texts. Over thirty years later, Timothy Brennan has registered a similar complaint. Brennan laments the fact that while Gramsci’s popularity has continued to expand dramatically, the contemporary uses of Gramsci remain superficial and even tendentious. These are only two instances of a recurrent claim made by Marxist scholars about the difference between the Gramsci that is dear to them and the barely recognizable Gramsci that merrily circulates in several academic disciplines. Anderson and Brennan observe a persistent deficit between the two, but what does it consist of and what are its roots?

The deficit is understood, first, as “philological.” In introducing his attempt to rescue Gramsci from the prevailing distortions, Anderson
immediately invokes the importance of “philology”: the need to “fix with greater precision what Gramsci said and meant in his captivity; to locate the sources from which he derived the terms of his discourse; and to reconstuct the network of oppositions and correspondences in the thought of his contemporaries into which his writing was inserted.” Brennan also appeals to “philology,” complaining about the limited and selective character of the current readings of Gramsci, and insisting on the need for a conscientious and patient approach to the totality of his texts against prevailing interpretative protocols. Brennan in fact identifies in Anderson one of the most outstanding examples of a “Left-philological tradition” that benefited from being “immersed in the first generation of Italian scholarship.”

A second aspect of this deficit, one that could be described as “sociological,” is the prevailing tendency to understand and read Gramsci as a familiar sort of intellectual—specifically, as a fellow academic. We read Gramsci the way we may read, say, Michel Foucault. Brennan identifies much of what is wrong with such an operation. It ignores the distinctiveness of revolutionaries, of party intellectuals like Gramsci. The discipline, purposefulness, and collective direction of their intellectual efforts should not be confused with our bureaucratic routines, the happy sprouting of our “interests,” and our comfortable solitude. This confusion has very practical consequences, such as a collective fixation on certain writings that appear familiar to us—the recognizable “theory” of the Prison Notebooks—to the detriment, for example, of “political journalism and party circulars.” This confusion also results in somewhat ironic outcomes. The notebooks may well look familiar to us only as a result of some unfortunate features of the conditions of production of Gramsci’s ideas in prison—the political isolation, the fascist censorship, the physical and human erosion that conspired to make the textual surface of the notebooks politically and historically generic. As a result, moreover, Gramsci is turned into a figure he would have recognized and derided—a “critical critic” confident in, or at least resigned to, the corrosive power of cultural criticism alone.

Brennan’s direct attack against existing contemporary portraits of the “intellectual” Gramsci can also be found in Anderson’s argument in embryonic form. While discussing the general features of Gramsci’s Notebooks, Anderson identifies the problem of the implicit, and often ignored, presence in the text of the theoretical, historical, and political conquests of the Third International. The international communist movement provided the scaffolding, the material, and the techniques for Gramsci to construct the complex edifice of the notebooks, in a way that would not be apparent to those who were satisfied with contemplating the finished product. Anderson therefore identified
the condition of possibility of that same tendency criticized by Brennan: the
temptation to approach Gramsci as one of us, without considering the very
particular organizational and political context in which he operated.

If Gramsci, as one of its living manifestations, “presumed,” rather than
ignored or transcended the “gains of the Comintern tradition,” then we can
also speak of a third, “political” dimension of the deficit between these inter-
pretations and the full scope of Gramsci’s thought. Anderson showed the
consequences of this deficit with a few polemically understated, but devastat-
ing strokes. He demonstrated how some of the great innovations and breaks
routinely attributed to Gramsci were in fact deeply rooted in the communist
movement. For instance, “hegemony” was already present first in Russian
Marxism (Plekhanov, Axelrod, Lenin) before the revolution, and again in
some of the key documents of the early Comintern congresses. The con-
cept of and prospect for a “war of position” had also been the subject of
fierce discussions (Kautsky, Martov, Luxemburg, Lenin), and according to
Gramsci had been applied in the Comintern’s Third World Congress thanks
to Lenin’s political leadership. Even Gramsci’s famous reflections on the
distinctiveness of Western democracy took the lead from Lenin’s insights.
Anderson’s philological recovery thus has a marked political payoff. Gramsci,
far from being some sort of civilized and sophisticated alternative to ortho-
dox, oriental Leninism, was revealed instead as organically connected to that
same experience.

Similarly, Brennan moves from some apt considerations about the
specificity of Gramsci as an intellectual to an attempt to reconnect the sev-
ered tissues of his politics. He demystifies the figure of Gramsci as lonely,
renegade genius, questions the tendentious celebration of him as a singu-
lar author, and directs our attention instead to the collective character of
the movement of which he was part. The very existence of Gramsci as an
author of texts available for academic consumption is rightly traced to the
efforts of international communism. The complexities and sophistication
of his thought emerge not against the grain of his political affiliation, but in
direct relation with it. Against the fetishism of the unorthodox Gramsci,
Brennan persuasively proposes a startlingly different figure to study and learn
from: Gramsci as the orthodox, and in important respects unremarkable,
Third Internationalist.

Anderson and Brennan, therefore, develop a similar critique. The tar-
get of this critique is the prevailing common sense that has generated the
post-Marxist Gramsci. This critique, moreover, points the way forward by
means of certain practical suggestions: to actually read Gramsci; to mistrust
the familiarity of the “critical critic” who speaks our academic language and
to appreciate instead how Gramsci is different as a way to understand how we ourselves can be different; and to study the legacy of the Third International, at a minimum, as a way to understand Gramsci without gross anachronisms and ridiculous appropriations. In a more general sense, these efforts add up to an attempt to impress a sharp political turn on to the contemporary academic uses of Gramsci.

Anderson and Brennan are of course only some of the most outstanding examples of this sort of Marxist critique. We can find similar arguments, for example, in Joseph Buttigieg’s “La circolazione delle categorie gramsciane negli Stati Uniti.” Addressing a mostly Italian audience about the reception of Gramsci in the United States by the end of the 1980s, Buttigieg registers the paradox of the “unknown Gramsci” and discusses the problem of the philological, sociological, and political deficits in understandings of Gramsci, as well as the need for a repoliticization of Gramsci.

In this work, I take as my starting point the terms of the problem, the impasse described by Anderson, Brennan, and other Marxists along with the need for a political turn in the academic uses of Gramsci. The three dimensions of the deficit regarding Gramsci can and should be overcome by pointing to the international communist movement as the historical locus of a specific philological tradition, mode of intellectual labor, and political project that are indispensable to understand, let alone put to use, Gramsci. However, I argue that this maneuver, as attempted by Anderson, Brennan, and Buttigieg, cannot succeed because it misses a crucial step. It is not possible to reorient the more serious layers of academia away from the existing protocols of Gramsciology without dealing with the question of the degeneration of the international communist movement and Stalinism. This is the colossal obstacle—rarely discussed precisely because it is so deeply entrenched—standing in the way of a genuine political turn in the study of Gramsci. This question is bracketed by both Anderson and Brennan in their interventions, one presumes, for practical and tactical reasons—not out of political complicity, and not because they actually understand the Third International as a homogenous and politically innocent tradition. Nonetheless, to present Gramsci as an unremarkable Third Internationalist without discussing the fact that this organization, roughly from the time of Gramsci’s arrest, went through a political, cultural, and theoretical degeneration of astounding proportions, would not vindicate him, and would not lead to an appreciation of the real Gramsci in contemporary academia. The political turn, executed in this way, would lead to what is widely and rightly regarded as a reproachable dead-end: the decrepit and totalitarian legacy of Stalinism. The Gramsci produced by it would be quite possibly false and in any case unpresentable.
Thus, while it is necessary to move Gramsci back to the political terrain to which he belonged, this must be done critically, measuring his thought and political practice against the forms of degeneration that afflicted the communist movement—opportunism, bureaucratization, and totalitarianism.

The difficulties involved in such an operation can be illustrated on the basis of Gramsci’s own description of his experience:

One’s critical self-awareness occurs . . . through a struggle of political ‘hegemonies,’ of contrasting directions, first in the realm of ethics, then in politics, arriving at a superior elaboration of one’s conception of the real. To be conscious of being part of a specific hegemonic force (that is, political consciousness) is the first phase toward a further and progressive self-awareness in which theory and practice finally become one . . . the unity of theory and practice is therefore not a mechanical, predetermined fact, but a process of historical becoming.31

One should insist, first, on the importance of Gramsci’s political commitment. The fact that he belonged to a definite political tradition is a paramount, not incidental and detachable feature of his existence as an intellectual. In part, this is to insist on the question of Gramsci’s actual intent, in a way that locates it not in the principle of independent authorial authority, but, quite the opposite, in his organic and practical connection to a collective political movement. To borrow his own formulations, Gramsci was “conscious of being part of a specific hegemonic force,” and thus came to embody a “unity of theory and practice.” This unity, however, is not established once and for all. It is not a “mechanical, predetermined fact” for us, as it was not for Gramsci either, who had to attain it through the arduous process of self-development he describes. It was, instead, itself contested, as the production and interpretation of Gramsci’s text became an important terrain of political struggle. Against Gramsci’s advice, this struggle today is not always conducted in a politically conscious way on the part of those who wish to appropriate him. Today, as Brennan correctly laments, following a pinch of Heidegger and a dash of Nietzsche, Gramsci often becomes one ingredient in an eclectic theoretical blend of what were politically hostile and incompatible traditions.32 A confrontation with Gramsci, therefore, should serve as an invitation to strive toward “critical self-awareness”—to understand where Gramsci stood politically as a way to understand where we ourselves stand. This struggle, however, at this stage cannot be conducted on a simple plane: for or against Gramsci, for or against Marxism. This is true because the political tradition to which he belonged cracked, decisively, around the time
of his arrest, leaving Gramsci and his legacy dangerously suspended above the political abyss of Stalinism. The first step in the long struggle to reclaim Gramsci, therefore, is to put into focus the problem of Stalinism.

In this chapter, I begin to move in this direction by discussing first, on the philological front, some of the Stalinist erasures and fabrications perpetrated against Gramsci during and after his life by the Italian Communist Party (PCI) under pressure from Moscow. Anderson and Brennan's appeals to philology—Anderson's call to examine what “Gramsci really said” and Brennan's invocation of the Italian philological tradition—are weakened not by some esoteric epistemological objections, but by the fact that they present the philological stewardship of Gramsci’s texts by the Third International too innocently.

Second, with respect to the sociological dimension of the above-mentioned deficit, I argue that it is not possible to simply and immediately counterpoise the communist, party intellectual, and Third Internationalist Gramsci to the prevailing view of him as a familiar intellectual, theorist, or critical critic. This very dichotomy was in fact itself the product of the Italian Communist Party's oscillations in managing Gramsci as a political, cultural, and theoretical resource. Both Gramscis—the intellectual that is immediately familiar to contemporary academics and the man of political action and struggle—were produced and used as a fig leaf for each Stalinist turn leading to the eventual self-liquidation of the PCI. The “intellectual” Gramsci is indeed a deplorable caricature that gets tossed back and forth as an academic plaything, but it was not created by academics. Conversely, the communist Gramsci that ought to be vindicated against this intellectual Gramsci cannot be presented as immediately and readily available, since it has been time and again cut to Stalinist order. I examine the key episodes of this process. Discussing these two matters will clear the way for addressing the political dimension of the deficit—a task that I undertake in the next chapter.

I. IN AND OUT OF THE SARCOPHAGUS: SOME EPISODES IN THE STALINIST MUMMIFICATION OF GRAMSCI

“Soliciting the texts”—that is, to make the texts say more than what they actually do, in order to support one's argument. This is a philological mistake that can also be found outside of philology, in all analyses and examinations of life. It corresponds, in the criminal code, to selling something in less quantity or of worse quality than was agreed upon. But it is not regarded as a crime, unless it involved the intent to deceive; and yet, sloppiness and incompetence, don't they deserve some kind of sanction, at least of intellectual and moral, if not of a judicial sort?
From the point of view of the contemporary reader, the body of Gramsci’s textual production appears as a finished product, readily available for multifarious scholarly investigations. Building on the insight of Marxist scholars, I contend that this body of texts emerged in fundamental continuity with the philological efforts of Gramsci’s comrades. This is true before Gramsci’s arrest, when his work was very much the product of a collective effort. But it is also true of his now popular prison writings, since his comrades, under difficult conditions, saved the manuscripts from destruction, performed the extraordinarily complex work of scholarly preparation of the notebooks, and published them for a wide audience. This process, however, was neither transparent nor merely technical. My point here is not so much that philology—least of all Marxist philology—can never be innocent of politics. Rather, it is to highlight and analyze how the degeneration of the international communist movement affected the process by which Gramsci’s texts were assembled and made available.

This process followed a contradictory logic. On one hand, the PCI recognized that in Gramsci it possessed a valuable political resource—a victim of fascism, an inspiring fighter, an original intellectual, a founding father, and so on. In this sense, the PCI was ready to undertake considerable efforts in bringing him to light as an author. On the other hand, Gramsci’s political ideas and positions before and after his imprisonment did not always conform to the directives coming from Moscow. As a result, dealing with Gramsci’s texts was for the PCI a dangerous matter as well, particularly since these Stalinist imperatives tended to change rapidly from one extreme to the other—for example, from the disastrous sectarianism of the “third period” to the class collaborationism of the “popular front;” or from the construction of socialism “at the speed of a tortoise” to forced collectivization at a reckless pace. Consequently, the degree to which the PCI found Gramsci’s ideas politically embarrassing and dangerous varied considerably depending on the specific political circumstances. But the process was always fraught with political censures and fabrications, so that Gramsci was either completely erased or made visible after cut-to-order falsifications.

It is probable, though not certain, that Gramsci himself was not a victim of direct Stalinist repression and reprisals while in prison. However, it is also likely that Gramsci was spared this sort of treatment, which during his time befell many communists, only because he was already effectively neutralized as a living political force by his fascist jailers. In any case, it is true that through all these difficulties and machinations, the PCI did philologically produce and preserve, not destroy or abandon, Gramsci’s work. But it did so in a very specific way for which we might find a useful historical
analogy in the Stalinist glorification of Lenin after his death. While betraying Lenin's legacy at every turn, Stalinism could not and did not want to dispose of it and in fact manufactured “Leninism” as an effective political weapon. Lenin became a mummified artifact trapped in a mausoleum. After Gramsci’s arrest, once the stewardship of his legacy fell in the hands of a Stalinized PCI, he became the victim of a similar fate. I will demonstrate this by examining the most significant moments of this process.

After Stalin, with the help of Bukharin, liquidated the Joint Opposition led by Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Kamenev, he quickly turned against his former ally by imposing a sharp “left” turn to Soviet policy. This was the infamous “third period” (1928–1934), when collectivization was brutally imposed in the Soviet Union while the revolution was declared imminent everywhere else. Social democratic and moderate forces were branded guilty of “social fascism” in a way that precluded any political alliance. This turn, which wreaked havoc worldwide from Germany to China, proved to be ruinous in Italy as well. The Italian Socialist Party and the “Giustizia e Libertà” antifascist movement were branded as social fascist, thus preventing a joint defensive struggle against the Mussolini regime. The expectation of a transitional, intermediate democratic phase after the defeat of fascism was rejected. Following the directives coming from Moscow, many communist militants brazenly intensified illegal activities and joined Gramsci in prison, convinced that the imminent proletarian uprising would soon set them free.

In this new context, the PCI became suspect and was subjected to strong political pressure from Moscow. Its political line, which had been fixed in the 1926 Third Congress held in Lyon and which expressed a sophisticated understanding of the complex landscape of classes and parties that constituted the national political terrain, was now branded as the expression of opportunism, weakness, and worse. The Manichean, and politically ham-fisted, outlook of the third period exploded against the PCI at the Tenth Plenum of the Comintern in July 1929. Led by Palmiro Togliatti, the party quickly adapted itself to the new line.

In this context, Gramsci, who authored the Lyon theses and had always fought against facile ultraleftism from the standpoint of the difficulty and complexity of the hegemonic struggle, became utterly unpresentable for the PCI. Moreover, even while in prison he came into sharp conflict with many of his comrades and was known to disagree vehemently with the new party line. He opposed the general turn outlined at the Tenth Plenum and insisted on a transitional intermediate phase in the struggle against fascism and the need to put forth the slogan of a constituent assembly.
From the philological point of view, the outcome of these events was drastic. Gramsci as an author was completely effaced. The PCI had previously planned the publication of some of Gramsci’s works under the title “Quaderno di ‘Stato Operaio’” for the tenth anniversary of its founding. Also planned was a collection titled, “Consigli di fabbrica e Stato operaio.” These plans were scrapped. With the benefit of hindsight, we could too easily recognize this as a mere “postponement.” But if the political climate had not dramatically changed again later with the rightward swing of the popular front period, we cannot be sure that Gramsci’s text would ever have been produced by the PCI. Even by 1937, when the political conjuncture made a “rehabilitation” of Gramsci less dangerous, the publication still did not occur. At that point, a frustrated party militant issued a direct appeal to Togliatti, asking him to “do everything possible to make Antonio better known to the party and the world.” But nothing was done, and not because of technical or logistical difficulties. Even Paolo Spriano, whose book serves an apology for the PCI’s treatment of Gramsci, admits that “This failure to undertake publication was the acid test of a profound discomfort in the party.”

The PCI not only refused to publish Gramsci’s texts, but for two and a half years during the third period completely eliminated any reference to his name in its publications. Gramsci disappeared in June 1931, after an article by Giorgio Amendola that referred to Gramsci’s anti-fascism and a speech by Egidio Gennari on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the PCI’s founding that called attention to Gramsci’s role as party leader. Significantly, when Togliatti published an article in 1931 in the party press that was meant to reflect on and describe the historical experience of the PCI, it contained no reference whatsoever to Gramsci. The silence was finally broken in December 1933 with the publication of an article by Luigi Longo that included a few references to Gramsci. It is no accident that this period of complete suppression was ushered in by the publication in the PCI party press of Stalin’s “Some Questions Concerning the Origins of Bolshevism,” a work that set the standard for censure and falsification in the communist movement.

While after 1933 Gramsci was not to disappear again from PCI literature, he continued to remain a potential source of danger. As a result, he continued to be presented in distorted fashion. Togliatti’s landmark article “Antonio Gramsci capo della classe operaia italiana,” published in 1937, contained some remarkable fabrications. They were meant to assimilate Gramsci, who had very recently died, into the Stalinist fold. This was the period of the purges, when anti-Trotskyist hysteria, compulsory “self-criticism,” and savage repression within the communist movement reached a climax. In this
context, Togliatti’s article falsely asserted that in 1930 Gramsci had issued from prison the “rather significant watchword, ‘Trotsky is the whore of fascism.’” Even Liguori and Spriano, PCI intellectuals who offered a sympathetic account of Togliatti’s role, admitted that this was a fabrication.

In the same article, Togliatti also claimed that Gramsci had begun to study Russian in prison in order to be able to read Stalin’s works in the original. This was also a lie. While in prison, Gramsci actually displayed conspicuous indifference for the works of Stalin, who had become the unquestioned leader of the Soviet Union. Gramsci’s struggle with prison and state authorities to be allowed to read books was an important aspect of his prison life. The fact that Gramsci did not request books written by Stalin and refers to him directly in his prison notebooks only once is significant. Comrades who had direct contact with Gramsci while in prison, moreover, later testified to his less than flattering opinion of Stalin.

Spriano’s interpretation of Togliatti’s fabrications was that he was merely trying to protect Gramsci’s legacy. But there is little reason to impute such noble sentiments to Togliatti. We could justifiably speculate that by misrepresenting Gramsci, Togliatti was in fact attempting to protect his own position. These kinds of maneuvers were the very fabric that constituted Stalinism as a school of falsification and more generally as a degeneration of the international communist movement. Although the political pressure to do so was, particularly in Italy, substantial, actively participating in this process was certainly not compulsory. There were other political choices available. During that time, many Left Oppositionists maintained a principled political opposition to Stalinism even in the face of the tremendous blows it was inflicting on them as communists and as human beings. Togliatti’s political and moral responsibility for his complicity with Stalinism is entirely his own and can only be compounded by his attempt to implicate Gramsci in it. In any case, the point here is to register again how the process by which the PCI administered Gramsci’s legacy and made him visible for public consumption was not at all immune from distortions.

The efforts to manufacture a Stalinist Gramsci were undercut by the publication of an explosive document: Gramsci’s October 1926 letter to the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party. This document had been written just as Stalin’s drive for the liquidation of the Joint Opposition entered its final stage. Writing from Moscow, Togliatti had demanded in the name of an increasingly Stalinized Comintern that the PCI take a public stand against Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Kamenev. Gramsci had prepared a document that fell far short of Togliatti’s expectations. In it, Gramsci recognized the credentials and “powerful contributions” of the three oppositionists...
as leading Bolsheviks and revolutionaries. In 1926, in a climate of increasing revisionism and falsification, this was already so dangerous a statement that Togliatti refused to deliver the document to the Central Committee of the Russian party. By 1937, when selected passages of Gramsci’s letter were finally made public, it had even more potentially explosive repercussions. The publication occurred, of course, against the will of the PCI leaders, and their initial reaction was to remain publicly silent. But in the political climate of 1937, when Zinoviev and Kamenev had already been executed as spies and Trotsky was denounced as the head of an imperialist conspiracy, the letter’s publication triggered a terrible internal crisis in the PCI, as well as a flurry of hypocritical attacks against Gramsci.

Only a few weeks after Gramsci’s death, key PCI leaders met in Paris to discuss the “errors” contained in Gramsci’s letter. This activity very nearly spilled over into public discourse. By the summer of 1938, Angelo Tasca had published the letter in its entirety, and the PCI’s Central Committee was in the middle of a Stalinist reshuffling. Dmitri Manuilsky, the loyal Stalinist secretary of the Comintern, raised heavy accusations against the PCI’s past political “oscillations.” As if on cue, many of the Italian leaders brought up Gramsci’s mistakes once again. Giuseppe Berti claimed that the 1926 letter was a symptom of an incomplete and insufficient “advance toward Bolshevism.” Giuseppe Di Vittorio remarked that “a public critique of the errors committed in 1926–7 in the face of Trotskyism is necessary.” At the end of the meeting, it was resolved to discuss this initiative with Togliatti. In September, Togliatti considered the matter and told his comrades that in his opinion this step was “not advisable.”

These episodes illustrate the peculiar character of the mummification of Gramsci. His place in the pantheon of the international communist movement was preserved, but reluctantly, and only to the degree that he would remain politically inert. On the occasion of Gramsci’s death, the PCI party newspaper published with great fanfare a solemn tribute to the great leader, signed by all the leading Stalinist sycophants in the Comintern. This is the Gramsci as a lifeless artifact that, much like Lenin, was certainly not without its uses. But to preserve Gramsci in such a condition required a delicate balance of philological suppressions and distortions. With the publication in 1937 of the 1926 letter to the Central Committee, a text that remained of great political significance, Gramsci threatened to come to life again. No longer able to suppress this document and afraid of a politically living Gramsci, the PCI tried to ignore it, discredit it, and even considered its public denunciation. It is true that the body of Gramsci’s work, which is for us so readily and transparently available, in a fundamental sense could
not exist without the efforts of the communist movement. But in a differ-
ent and no less significant sense, we should say that this body of work also
emerged in spite of these efforts. This contradiction is as puzzling and as
real as those at the heart of the movement’s degeneration: between preserv-
ing a form and subverting its content; between the greatest attempt to snap
the cycle of human history as the mere reconfiguration of oppression and
one of its most appalling manifestations.

Far from being the effect of a momentary political disorientation on
the part of the PCI, this process continued well after the 1930s. The two
most important moments in the emergence of Gramsci as an author are
arguably the original publication of Gramsci’s prison letters in 1947 and his
prison notebooks between 1948 and 1951. As I will show, serious philologi-
cal manipulations occurred in both of these instances.

In the case of Gramsci’s letters, we can gauge a first approximation of
their censorship from the fact that, out of the 428 letters that appeared in
the second edition published in 1965, 119 had not appeared in the first.56
This measurement is neither exact nor decisive, since some of the letters
that were not included in the first edition were only found after its publica-
tion. Nonetheless, the fact that substantial and politically motivated tam-
pering took place is beyond dispute.57 Gramsci’s references to major figures
of the international communist movement who were anathema to Stalin-
ism—Trotsky, most importantly, but also Amadeo Bordiga and Rosa Lux-
emburg—were completely eliminated. Some relatively minor figures, such
as Dmitri Mirsky and Lucien Laurat, also disappeared from Gramsci’s let-
ters.58 Gramsci’s remarks in praise of Mirsky’s work and his request to read
Laurat’s were purged from his texts by the Stalinist editors. This censure reg-
isters several important points: the thoroughness and systematic character of
the philological distortions by Italian Stalinism, its organic connection with
the apparatus of falsification and repression centered in Moscow, and the
distance separating Gramsci’s own intellectual and political sensibilities from
the likes of Togliatti and Stalin.

The method by which these erasures were implemented is in most
cases straightforward: some letters were not included at all.59 It is true
that the editor of the first edition, Felice Platone, did not advertise it as a
complete one. But he did promise the “widest selection” without indicat-
ing that there was an underlying political criterion of selection. Other let-
ters did appear in the first edition, but with substantial and unannounced
omissions. Passages with undesirable references were systematically edited
out according to an unmistakably political criterion.60 In the case of other
passages, those impossible to lop off neatly, Platone proceeded to alter
sentences, again without serving notice of the changes to the reader. This created a presumption of authenticity in a manner that violated the most fundamental philological standards.

Similar issues arise in the case of the original publication of Gramsci’s notebooks, which, at least in one respect, were more difficult for the PCI to defuse. It was easier to isolate and eliminate the dangerous elements in the letters, because many of these dealt with personal questions, mundane requests, and so on. But the notebooks dealt with a wide range of serious historical, cultural, political, and economic questions. Whether he happened to reflect on the Italian Risorgimento, Goethe, or normative grammar, Gramsci’s notes exuded an intellectual curiosity and a sophisticated outlook that did not at all conform to the prevailing attitudes and protocols of Stalinism. This created the possibility for serious discomfort and disjuncture within the party.

But Gramsci’s notebooks were also a potentially tremendous resource for the PCI. Specifically, the immediate post-World War II period provided the party with an opportunity to stake its claim as the main torchbearer of a national and democratic culture that was being threatened by a revival of clerical obscurantism, American interference, and so on. In this context, making Gramsci available for public consumption was a way for the PCI to broaden its appeal as a national (before it was partisan) and cultural (before it was political) force. The publication of the notebooks was the principal means by which the PCI attempted to win favor and attract a wide range of potential supporters, particularly intellectuals. Accordingly, the publication was packaged as an academic affair—a philologically rigorous contribution to the cultural heritage of the nation. It was claimed that the editorial work had been delegated to a committee of experts. In fact, it appears that this committee was mere window-dressing and that Togliatti held the reins of the editorial work very tightly.

The dangers inherent in Gramsci’s notebooks were carefully defused by simply excluding those notes that were especially problematic from the first edition. Many of these happened to be written relatively late, between 1932 and 1934, when Gramsci was better able to take measure and assess with an increasingly critical spirit the development of the Soviet Union under Stalinist guidance. Another method by which the notebooks were defused was a careful calibration of the textual apparatus that introduced and contextualized the text. Here we find a series of skillful displacements of Gramsci’s reflections. In a 1946 article that announced the forthcoming publication of the notebooks, they were presented as a study of the history of Italian intellectuals. This is not exactly false, since this theme appears repeatedly in the
notebooks, but it is a very reductive assessment of Gramsci’s work, which channeled the political elements of his meditations through the somewhat safer prism of national history and culture. In general, the trick was to frame the text for the reader as squarely situated on the terrain of the long development of Italian culture, rather than the political controversies that shook the international communist movement in the 1920s and 1930s.

Occasionally, in order to achieve the same effect, a different sort of displacement was necessary. In the case of a selection from the Notebooks published with the title Past and Present in 1951, the introduction explained that the proper context was “certain political experiences Gramsci had from his youth up to his arrest.” Here the political content of the notes could not be denied, but it could nonetheless be carefully restricted to a specific time frame. The effect was to disguise the fact that the notes also addressed later political developments, including the thorny matter of the Soviet Union’s development. The note that appears as epigraph for this section of my work is one instructive example. The actual context for Gramsci’s complaint against the dishonest tendency to “solicit the texts” was in fact the Stalinist habit of “cooking the books” of the planned Soviet economy—distorting statistics, exaggerating accomplishments, and so on. This is not readily apparent at a first, innocent reading of the text. The real context is “outside of philology,” as Gramsci put it. It is no small irony that Gramsci only became visible as an author while trapped inside a very peculiar kind of philology, consisting of subtle and not so subtle Stalinist censures, distortions, and fabrications.

II. FROM THE INTELLECT TO THE WILL (AND VICE-VERSA): THE COMMUNIST AND INTELLECTUAL GRAMSCI

My intellectual formation, in its entirety, has been of a polemical order. To merely think “disinterestedly,” that is, to study for the sake of studying, is very difficult for me. Usually I find it necessary to take a dialogical or dialectical standpoint, otherwise I am unable to feel any intellectual stimulus.

It seems to me that if I were to be released from prison now, I would no longer be able to orient myself in the vast world; I would not be able to join any sentimental current. I would continue to live merely with the brain . . . seeing in all people, even those whom I should regard as close to me, not as living beings, but as puzzles to be solved . . . The fact is that I find myself unable to overcome this condition but in one way: taking refuge in the pure domain of abstract intellect, making thus of my isolation the exclusive form of my existence.
The two passages cited above are the expression of two very different sensibilities. What sort of person would write them? We would guess that the second was written by an exhausted man. Wearily surveying the landscape around him, he sees a series of questions. But they are, so to speak, academic questions—problems and puzzles, all void of living significance. One could work his way through them. But why, and in what order? He would do it, but as a matter of routine induced by the prison imperative to pass time—as others might do it because it is the routine of their job. The passage, we know, was written in prison. But it can also evoke the bureaucrat’s desk (without even the vaguest self-assurance of function and purpose), the monastic cell (without illusions about a spiritual or otherworldly life), or our own ivory tower (without the attached perks and social status).

The first passage, instead, bristles with energy. It was written by a man who partakes in the life of the mind, but only as one front of a larger struggle. He is a fighter who fights with, among other things, pen and paper. He is capable of and indeed must address the widest questions posed by social experience. But his ruthlessly practical disposition does not allow him to contemplate or revel in their complexities for their own sake. He is not interested in studying, as Marx put it while complaining about his university professors, “only for the purpose of finding new dead ends in every corner of the world.”

In the first passage, we recognize the communist Gramsci, merging political militancy and intellectual development into an inextricable whole. The sickly silhouette drawn by the second passage illustrates not the fact, but the looming danger of Gramsci’s own political, moral, and spiritual decay. This Gramsci, after all, is still able to self-reflectively notice and lament his ascent into the “pure domain of abstract intellect.” Ironically, it is this second, “disinterested” Gramsci (in the poorest sense of the word) that circulates as a respectable figure in academia. His communism is either quickly brushed off as a historical curiosity or magnanimously excused as a venial sin, reducing Gramsci to the state he lamented while still alive.

As I have shown, attempts to reclaim Gramsci for Marxism have focused on the dichotomy between the “communist” and the “intellectual,” either reversing the polarity of contemporary academic accounts by championing the former against the latter, or, more sensibly, undermining the dichotomy itself by insisting that in Gramsci’s case the former cannot be separated from the latter. Joseph Buttigieg’s version of this argument is particularly useful because it claims to have uncovered the tainted origin of this dichotomy. According to Buttigieg, it is found in Benedetto Croce’s tendentious assessment of Gramsci after the publication of the Letters. On the one hand, Croce claimed Gramsci for his neoidealist philosophy—”as an intellectual he was one of ours”—while
on the other he identified Gramsci’s limits in his political involvement. According to Buttigieg, Croce’s insidious appreciation of Gramsci—a praiseworthy intellectual, albeit corrupted by his frequent carnal relations with the political world—is the fountainhead of the later “interpretations and uses” of Gramsci that “dissociated his thought from his political activity.” “What could be more damaging to the marxist tradition,” asks an exasperated Buttigieg, “than to deprive it of one of its most exemplary figures?”

Buttigieg’s critique is legitimate, and, in a general sense, correct. But it is seriously weakened because it fails to acknowledge the fact that the origins of the dichotomy can be found not in Croce, but in the PCI itself. It was the PCI that established the dichotomy between various versions of Gramsci as the supra-political thinker, on one hand, and the communist party activist on the other. This was a sustained process that for a long time followed the political contortions dictated by Moscow, and ended only with the self-liquidation of the party in 1991. Contemporary academic illusions about the sort of intellectual represented by Gramsci were thus in good part inherited from the contradictions that burdened the international communist movement. The “sociological” deficit cannot be overcome by simply invoking the communist Gramsci or by inveighing against a false dichotomy without taking measure of this process, which I will now sketch out.

As noted earlier, the “third period” declared by Stalin was characterized by an extreme turn to the left by the Third International. This political climate was also characterized by a definite strain of anti-intellectualism. In compliance with Moscow’s directives, the PCI refused to recognize any political distinctions to its right, from fascism to the Socialist parties. The difficult hegemonic relations between the working class and its potential allies were replaced by a simple frontal struggle of “class against class.” These simplifications, combined with the perceived imminence of the revolution, made this a time for action, not theory. At the height of this frenzy, as we have seen, Gramsci’s name was erased from PCI publications. Before the close of the “third period,” however, some references to Gramsci reappeared, presenting a peculiar and partial figure. In these references, Gramsci was stripped of any distinguishing intellectual and theoretical faculties—of the capacity to pause, reflect, and debate rather than mechanically issue and follow orders. Without individuality, this Gramsci was a replaceable component of a faceless leadership. Without theory, he was an activist in the impoverished literal sense that he . . . acted. This is the actual origin of the “communist” Gramsci found in the dichotomy described above.

This figure became fully visible in a curious episode that took place in February 1934, when Nicola Potenza, a young party member in exile,
decided to write an article about Gramsci. In this article, published by a PCI weekly distributed in Paris, Potenza recalled an earlier personal encounter with Gramsci. He painted a vivid and distinctive picture of the man against the less inspiring background of the current PCI leadership. The article praised Gramsci as a party leader “clearly set apart from all the others” by his patience, intellectual honesty, and capacity to think through a political question without falling back on dogmas and schematism:

Gramsci never expressed a single hasty judgment: never reached a conclusion before the presentation of the facts, or substituted one for them . . . As for facts insufficiently studied, he had no hesitation in saying that judgment must be reserved . . . Antonio Gramsci, in short, was exactly the opposite of those geniuses who understand everything at a glance and rattle off intellectual syntheses like machine-gun fire.84

Potenza also praised Gramsci for his “Socratic” disposition—his willingness to listen and learn as he taught others:

If one was discussing a definite body of fact, Gramsci examined its various aspects, its various phases, its various relations with other facts, and its developments, until he saw it, and made others see it, in broad daylight . . . If a discussion had no set theme, he willingly let himself be carried along by our questions . . . and in the course of the argument he himself raised new problems.85

Without naming names, Potenza was clearly expressing his frustration about the prevailing climate of dogmatism in the PCI. In his account, Gramsci embodied a vibrant intraparty life that had been lost.86 Potenza’s article provoked a prompt and furious reaction. He was soon rebuked in the same publication by means of an editorial that, in chastising Potenza, reduced Gramsci to a truncated sort of “communist.”87 The qualities described by Potenza were branded as weaknesses characteristic of intellectuals who are perpetually vacillating, incapable of action, and only good for “stuffing our comrades’ heads” with doubts.88 The real Gramsci was a party-man, and without the party, he “is something else, he no longer concerns us.”89

These lines are remarkable for their philistinism and one-sidedness. It is no surprise that the PCI would insist on political militancy as Gramsci’s defining trait. But by doing so in such a violent way, forcibly detaching Gramsci’s political activism from any meaningful intellectual activity, the PCI actually established the foundation for the dichotomy between the
communist and the intellectual. Gramsci the “party-man,” which we now easily recognize in its contemporary pejorative sense, was implicitly placed in opposition to the good-for-nothing scribbler—to Socrates, yes, but the one mocked by Aristophanes in *The Clouds*. This move, peddling a “communist” Gramsci in accordance with the ugly and impoverished climate of the third period, opened, before Croce and long before post-Marxist academics, a space for the similarly truncated “intellectual” Gramsci.

But the PCI did not wait for Croce to directly articulate the second part of the dichotomy. Instead, it did so itself as a result of a changing political climate, following another one of Stalin’s abrupt turns, though this time toward the right. The turn toward the “popular front” strategy began in 1934 and was enshrined as an official policy in the summer of 1935 at the seventh Comintern congress. Communist parties were now instructed to present themselves as genuinely national forces, defenders of democracy, and trustworthy partners in the broadest alliances against fascism—without any class discrimination.

From the period of the popular front onward, the PCI began to present Gramsci as an intellectual who stood in important respects above the political fray: as a national treasure, a pioneer in various academic disciplines, and even as the embodiment of classical virtues. Already in 1935, we find the first signals of this transformation. In an article by Ruggero Grieco, the PCI began to claim that Gramsci had shown the way to the party when he insisted on the question of Italy’s national peculiarities. In the same year, Luigi Longo reported favorably on the illegal propaganda work done in Italy by means of the slogan of “Gramsci, the greatest Italian of the age.” Though the process took some time to fully develop, as noted by Spriano, “[F]rom then on . . . the glorification of Gramsci as a great intellectual and scholar went hand in hand with that of Gramsci as the great Italian.”

The PCI’s manufacturing of the “intellectual” Gramsci received a great stimulus in the period between the end of World War II and the full onset of the cold war. Working from a position of military and political strength, the PCI had actively collaborated in placing Italian capitalism back on its feet and had joined the early “national unity” governments. The PCI’s political line—pursued under Moscow’s order to comply with the division of Europe agreed upon at Yalta—was one of interclassist, national cooperation. The prospect of a socialist revolution was as remote and perfunctory as it had been for the Socialist parties of the Second International. As discussed above, it was during this time that the PCI published the first edition of both the *Prison Notebooks* and the *Letters*.

In the first case, the PCI used and manipulated the notebooks quite consciously in order to appeal to a layer of noncommunist intellectuals and
stake its claim as the leading cultural force of the nation. As already discussed in the previous section, the first edition of the notebooks was introduced as a study of the history of Italian intellectuals. This edition was carefully edited to present a Gramsci that intellectuals would easily recognize and appreciate: one who was learned, sophisticated, respectful of traditional academic disciplines and able to significantly contribute to many of them. He was a “great intellectual—now a philosopher, now a historian, now a scholar of literature.”95 The “thematic” first edition of the Notebooks was intended to mirror the classic separation of the various branches of knowledge in a way that was sure to please university professors. But it actually offended Gramsci’s own sensibilities by reproducing what one author calls the “traditional forms of consciousness that Gramsci intended to overcome.”96 The Gramsci that emerged from this text was a man of culture. He was not a fiery, combative figure who arose from the cauldron of the international communist movement and its struggles, but an Olympian one, majestic and distant from the petty squabbles of politics. More specifically, he was a man of a national culture, rooted in and respectful of its traditions.97 As Togliatti put it in 1947, Gramsci belonged to every Italian.98

In the first publication of the Letters, Gramsci was also presented as a great national intellectual. By defusing and deflecting the political content of the letters through careful selections and editorial framing, the PCI hoped to seduce noncommunist intellectuals, men of culture, and academics. But the editorial work of the PCI also cut in a different direction. It eliminated the references to Gramsci’s personal rapport with his wife and his sister-in-law, his friendships in prison, and his mundane requests for clothes, medicine, and money. In this way, it produced an austere, classical figure that also appealed to these intellectuals because it seemed to overcome the limitations of the Italian national character and present its best qualities in concentrated form.99 The PCI thus skillfully turned Gramsci into a mirror that reflected and magnified the ideals and aspirations of these elements.

Many noncommunist intellectuals reacted enthusiastically to this idealized, and yet pleasantly familiar, Gramsci of the Letters. Serini recognized the purity of Gramsci’s motives, crystallized in a “Socratic commitment to an inner imperative that was essentially ethical, above all partisanship.” Mila was so overwhelmed that he pledged “unconditional allegiance” to this Gramsci on behalf of all “middle-class intellectuals.” Pancrazi hailed Gramsci as he ascended to a “common ideal fatherland,” deservedly joining the great patriotic Italians of the Risorgimento.100

The maneuver initiated by the PCI after World War II thus succeeded, but at a cost. It succeeded precisely to the extent that it confined Gramsci to
the “pure domain of abstract intellect.” The publication of his two most famous texts completed the dichotomy between the “intellectual” and the “communist” Gramsci. The figure of Gramsci as the great national intellectual continued to circulate thereafter. It could be recognized, for example, in a 1967 conference on “Gramsci and contemporary culture,” held in Cagliari. The conference was structured in accordance with standard academic disciplinary divisions and featured a Gramsci who was “more a great democratic author than revolutionary leader and thinker, more located in the abstract confrontation with other great thinkers than rooted in the concrete events of his time.”

For a long time, the “intellectual” Gramsci, therefore, was a recurring and important facet of a complex negotiation between the PCI’s increasingly reformist outlook and its revolutionary origins. Each step taken by the PCI (popular front, polycentrism, eurocommunism) in what now looks like a long march away from its revolutionary beginnings, was also accompanied by laborious reinterpretations of Gramsci’s political thought, striving to demonstrate how this great thinker had already anticipated and prefigured each move, particularly in the suitably cryptic notebooks.

To illustrate this long process, it will suffice here to discuss one of its representative moments. In the late 1970s, the PCI endeavored to forge a “historic compromise” by participating in a coalition government with the Christian Democrats, the party that stood as the bulwark of the post-World War II status quo in Italy. At that time, the question of the extent of the PCI’s democratic credentials and commitment naturally became a pressing one. Intellectuals aligned with the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) raised this question in an especially forceful manner in the pages of their main theoretical journal, Mondoperaio. These intellectuals (most prominently Norberto Bobbio) exposed the contradiction at the heart of the PCI’s position: If the Communists were serious in taking such a momentous step toward the final acceptance of the values and institutions of liberal democracy, the PCI could not simply amend its Marxist heritage, but would have to discard it.

The diatribe revolved specifically around Gramsci’s thought and its compatibility with the current PCI policies. The Communists had begun to experiment by grafting pluralist-democratic elements onto the body of Gramsci’s work, and the PSI insisted in pointing out the hopelessness of these attempts. In that context, it was the PSI who had to insist that Gramsci could not be separated from the experience and conceptual horizons of the Third International. The PSI, which had embraced long ago the conclusions that the PCI was still struggling with, demanded historical satisfaction. If the PCI was validating in practice the PSI’s historical choices—its assessment of the Soviet experience, of pluralism and liberal democracy, of a “democratic” and “secular”
understandings of the party, and of socialism as a new order that would grow peacefully from within the existing structures—it still needed to explicitly concede all this at the level of theory and historical legacy. Most prominently, that meant an explicit rejection of what Gramsci had represented.

The PCI leaders and intellectuals reacted belligerently and decided that the party could live with such a contradiction, at least for the time being. This attitude is captured by Giorgio Napolitano’s elusive response to the PSI:

We have no reason to deny what has changed, not only, as is plain, in the historical context from Gramsci’s epoch . . . but also in our understanding of the question of democracy and socialism and in our assessment of the experience in the socialist countries. But those who demand . . . spectacular breaks from the process of historical development through which we have arrived, critically and autonomously, to the original positions that now characterize our party, are truly mistaken.102

By this time, therefore, the PCI’s break with Gramsci was not complete. This was only one episode of a long process that constantly strained Gramsci’s legacy, continuing to pull it to the right in order to cover an increasingly distant and implausible ideological terrain. By 1987, on the fiftieth anniversary of Gramsci’s death, this elastic continuity was finally about to snap.

By this time, the figure of the intellectual Gramsci had appeared once again. But with glasnost already in the air, this Gramsci was now to play a more specific and radical function. The prospect of the PCI dropping altogether the ideological ballast of the past was by now quite real, and the dramatic endgame would also have to be played out on the terrain of Gramsci’s legacy. Lucio Colletti’s reflections on this problem provide a sense how the die was (nearly) cast: “The Italian left today proclaims its near-complete reformism . . . It is, however, a fact . . . that Gramsci never was a reformist . . . the half-century that separates us from him has not passed in vain . . . the choices made by the PCI have, in practice, and regardless of how people might describe them in words, marked a distance that is now virtually irrevocable.”103

In this context, once the PCI finally recognized Gramsci as politically irretrievable, the “intellectual” Gramsci was evoked once more, and with renewed energy. It was the vehicle through which the PCI could, it imagined, part gracefully with its heritage and ease its collective conscience through such a difficult transition. The PCI was burying Gramsci politically once and for all, but in return it would do its best to intercede for his soul to ascend to that better place where “classical” authors reside. Perhaps the most telling example of this tendency was an intervention by Aldo Schiavone in
1987. He argued that Gramsci was indeed a “classical” author, “a great figure in the history of political thought, like Machiavelli and Hobbes.” But this was strange praise indeed, since Schiavone insisted that precisely because of the classical status of Gramsci’s thought “we are forced, today, to take measure of its total inadequacy.”\textsuperscript{104} Gramsci was a classic of political thought in the sense that it could at last be shelved—perhaps to be picked up again later, at one’s leisure, to answer endless academic questions (but why, and in what order?). What made Schiavone’s intervention especially significant was that he was not only a card-carrying PCI intellectual, but at that time had been the director of the Fondazione Istituto Gramsci for seven years.\textsuperscript{105} A short time later, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the PCI opened a “constituent phase” that culminated with the self-liquidation of the party in 1991. Finally, mercifully, it had let Gramsci go.\textsuperscript{106}
Chapter Three
A Man of Modest Appetite
Gramsci and Political Cannibalism

Cannibalism is so repugnant that we would believe a typical person if he were to say: “if I had a choice, I would kill myself before becoming a cannibal.” In reality, that same person, if actually presented with the choice of killing himself or becoming a cannibal, would not reason in that way, since at that point great changes in his self would have already occurred, so that “killing oneself” would no longer appear as a necessary alternative . . . The drama for such a person consists in this: he can sense the process of decay, that is, he can sense that he will become a cannibal, and he thinks: if this happens, at a certain point I will kill myself to prevent it. But when will this “point” be? . . . This fact must be studied in its contemporary manifestations. It’s not that it has not occurred in the past, but certainly in the present it has assumed a special and . . . voluntary form. That is, today this fact can be counted upon to occur and it is systematically prepared (“systematically” meaning as a “mass” phenomenon . . . ) It is certain that today a “terroristic” element has emerged that did not exist in the past . . . This only increases the responsibility of those who, having been in a position to prevent it . . . failed to do so out of . . . negligence or even ill-will.1

The motivating impulse of the first part of this book is the hope that we can learn to appreciate Gramsci as a political figure and as the product of a specific political experience. It is in this spirit that I have endorsed the recurring attempts to reclaim Gramsci for Marxism. But “Marxism” is a queer thing indeed if it can accommodate both the constellation of social forces, ideals, and struggles that produced a figure as remarkable as Gramsci, alongside those that distorted, falsified and effectively turned him into a politically inanimate object. I have argued, accordingly, that Marxism can only succeed in reclaiming Gramsci if it identifies itself through a more specific
set of historical and political coordinates. Specifically, my argument is predi-
cated on the need to take seriously the legacy of Stalinism, understood as
a distinct and crucial phenomenon. I have traced the effects of Stalinism,
first, in the process of production and preservation of Gramsci as an author.
I have then traced its effects on the rise of the dichotomy separating the
communist from the intellectual Gramsci. I have addressed from this stand-
point, in other words, the “philological” and “sociological” deficits afflicting
the contemporary uses of Gramsci. But the relationship between Stalinism
and Gramsci needs to be addressed even more directly, in a political sense.
Gramsci lived at the time when Stalinism emerged as the victor of a political
struggle within the Russian Communist Party, the Comintern, and the PCI.
At least until 1926, Gramsci was no mere spectator in this struggle. Even
after his arrest, in spite of the limits and censorship imposed by the prison
regime, he did gather information and express judgments on developments
in the Soviet Union. This is the terrain on which Gramsci can be judged
politically in the most direct way. Those who insist, rightly, that Gramsci’s
theoretical merits and allure should not be assessed independently from
political considerations should work to interrogate both Gramsci and Marx-
ism on this specific terrain.

We should of course be leery of the futility and ugliness of putting
the dead on trial. But, as I have tried to argue, a considerate political judg-
ment of Gramsci’s significance is a legitimate and necessary task. We can
skirt this task if we are in the habit of eclectically picking and choosing theo-
retical elements in the great supermarket of political ideas. We can skirt it so
long as political theory remains not the basis for political action but only for
the wide-ranging and daring interpretive acrobatics of the intellectual virt-
uo. We can skirt it so long as history confronts us as the big warehouse of
accumulated facts rather than lessons of political life. We can skirt this task,
finally, if we consider Marxism politically irretrievable and beside the point.
This was not Gramsci’s attitude, and so, in this sense, we are at least sure to
judge him on his own terms.

In doing so, by measuring Gramsci’s political thought and action against
the rise of Stalinism, we also begin to address directly the political deficit of
the contemporary academic approaches to the Italian revolutionary. But if
Stalinism, as a context or background, is critical to any attempt to make sense
and make use of Gramsci, with a slight shift of perspective, Gramsci appears
as a start, rather than an endpoint. If putting Stalinism into focus is indis-
pendable in order to make sense of Gramsci, it is also the case that a study of
Gramsci can serve as a serviceable entry point into the complex and impor-
tant task of understanding and coming to terms with Stalinism. Gramsci’s
story, in other words, can also be a way to begin putting into focus the question of how to locate and recover a historically and politically presentable Marxism from the ruins of Stalinism—a matter that is even more deserving of critical attention and considerate political judgment.

What should we ask of Gramsci from this standpoint? Having appreciated the many ways in which Stalinism silenced and distorted Gramsci once he was forcibly removed from the political arena, we can ask if Gramsci himself contributed to or opposed the rise and consolidation of Stalinism, and in what manner. If, to take one extreme possibility, Gramsci willingly and actively facilitated the rise of Stalinism, the damage he later suffered by it could be considered self-inflicted. His story would still retain the interest and moral complexities characteristic of a tragedy, but as a political figure Gramsci would reveal irremediable limits.

We can also ask whether Gramsci, as a thinker and theorist, was able to diagnose Stalinism in its specificity, causes, and implications. This second question, which is of course related to the first, is particularly important in the light of the typical portrait of Gramsci in contemporary academia: innovative, sophisticated, and capable of recognizing the schematism and vulgari-
ties of orthodoxy.

Although a full answer to these questions would deserve a more extensive treatment, I will here offer a contribution to it. I will discuss first an important episode that took place in 1926, when, shortly before his arrest, Gramsci came into conflict with Palmiro Togliatti and the Stalinist-controlled Comintern. I will then turn to a consideration of the presence and role of the Soviet Union in Gramsci’s reflections in his prison notebooks.

I want to be more explicit about the limits of my contribution. First, my discussion will not be exhaustive in assessing the question of Gramsci’s relation to Stalinism. To do so, one would have to consider other important moments in his political life. Second, the circumstances of Gramsci’s arrest, the fact that his 1926 conflict with the Comintern abruptly ended with Gramsci’s imprisonment, and the strict prison regime in which Gramsci could still think (though not act) politically all impose a more general limit that cannot be transcended. Because the meaning and intent of Gramsci’s prison writing is hidden behind various textual stratagems and deliberate ambiguities, the task of assessing his political and historical responsibility necessarily involves difficult and potentially dubious forms of conjecture and speculation. Finally, in order to measure Gramsci against Stalinism, this phenomenon would deserve a more extensive consideration. Its essence, its historical and geographic applicability, and indeed its very existence as distinct from early Bolshevism are complex and contested questions. While a full
discuss of this problem is not possible at this stage, it is at least necessary to provide a few provisional signposts in order to identify some of the key propositions and difficulties from the standpoint of my argument.

The first point of reference is Stephen Cohen’s essay “Bolshevism and Stalinism.” Cohen provides a powerful argument for the need to discuss Stalinism as a distinct and important historical phenomenon, particularly in contrast to earlier Bolshevism, which it deformed and derailed. This is an essential starting point, especially in the light of the opposite, long-standing near-consensus view that Cohen capably documents and criticizes. Cohen’s essay also usefully puts into focus the political aspect of Stalinism as the outcome of a living struggle, as opposed to a predetermined one, or, worse, a mere automatic process driven by the Bolsheviks’ totalitarian ideology. Thinking of Stalinism in this way opens up the possibility that a principled, organized political alternative to it might have existed—a path not taken in the Soviet experience that could disrupt the set of commonplaces organizing and regimenting our understanding of it. Cohen, who has his own ideas about what constituted this political alternative, makes a succinct and compelling case for understanding Stalinism politically. I disagree, however, both with his insistence that the essence of Stalinism was the excess and paroxysm of terror, and with the consequently narrow historical and geographical applicability of the term to the set of processes affecting the Soviet Union from the beginning of forced collectivization in 1929 to Stalin’s death in 1953. I take instead Stalinism to be a category applicable before 1929 (already identifiable in the political struggles of the mid-1920s) as well as long after 1953. Neither Stalin’s death nor Nikita Khrushchev’s secret report and the later public denunciation of Stalin’s mistakes, excesses, or even crimes put an end to Stalinism in the Soviet Union. Geographically, though in important respect tied to an ideology and program of national (and specifically Russian) socialism, Stalinism existed as an international phenomenon, embodied in political parties and regimes across the globe. In fact, Stalinism continues to exist institutionally even today, scattered and marginalized, but not yet obliterated by the collapse of so-called “actually existing socialism.” The scope and significance of Stalinism, in other words, far exceeds the terroristic paroxysm of the 1930s.

August Nimtz’s essay on Marxism provides a second point of reference. Taking measure of the long trajectory of Marxism as a political movement, Nimtz usefully defines Stalinism as a “counterrevolution” and “degeneration” internal to the workers’ movement. Doing so helps put into better focus the contradiction between form and content I introduced in the previous chapter. The assault against the programs and accomplishments of the
Russian Revolution and of the international communist movement was carried out in a way that more or less preserved, at least until 1991, the form of the old icons, texts, and traditions. But this could not be a purely “formal” matter—not just because form and content cannot be fully and neatly disentangled in Platonic fashion, but because Stalinism rested on the social foundation put into place by the revolution: the socialized means of production and a planned economy. Moreover, while this process of degeneration came about through a “betrayal,” this should not be understood in a crude sense. Although Stalinism recruited and made extensive use of ex-Mensheviks and reactionaries of all stripes, and although it physically eliminated the majority of the Bolsheviks who led the October Revolution and fought during the Russian Civil War, it was not a hostile takeover engineered by outside forces. The gravediggers of the revolution for the most part came from the same ranks as those who had accomplished it. Such people underwent, no doubt, a profound political and psychological transformation. As Gramsci’s note suggests, these people, still thinking of themselves as revolutionaries, had become unable to realize that they were actually systematically devouring the revolution.

Nimtz’s essay is also useful to highlight the importance of the democratic question—both within the party and in society as a whole—in thinking about Stalinism. Nimtz rightly raises the question of democracy not as a piety or an abstract principle, but as the political space, organizational forms, and institutions necessary for working people to advance their interests. He explains the ways in which, in this sense, Stalinism “usurped political power,” departing from the democratic tradition of early Bolshevism. Stalinism, as a form of totalitarianism, crushed the democratic elements that early Bolshevism, under very difficult circumstances, had valued and struggled for in the party, the Comintern, and Russian society. Simultaneously, however, Stalinism also enforced a process of (social) democratization of the international Communist movement. It introduced and enforced a “democratic” policy of class collaboration that deferred to bourgeois parliamentarism and reduced socialism to a distant and vague aspiration. It is no accident that some of the most important revolutionary and near-revolutionary events of the past sixty years—Greece in 1947, Cuba in 1959, France in 1968, Nicaragua in 1978, Grenada in 1979—occurred in spite, not because of, Stalinist actions. This process of (social) democratization could be traced, for example, in the French Communist Party—a famously lemming-like organization in its deference to Moscow—and the indispensable role played by it in supporting the capitalist state in 1936, 1944–45, and 1968. This process is also evident in the case of the PCI. Its strategies of “Italian way to
socialism,” “eurocommunism,” “historic compromise,” its active, willing role in restoring and stabilizing Italian capitalism after World War II and in the late 1970s emerged not against, but in accordance with, the Stalinist political culture and policies of “socialism in one country,” “peaceful coexistence,” and “popular front.” Stalinism, therefore, had a “democratic” face as well as a totalitarian one, and to think about the relation between Gramsci and Stalinism requires addressing both.

Joan Barth Urban provides a third, this time largely negative, point of reference for a provisional understanding of Stalinism. Urban’s account of the PCI reduces Stalinism, in one sense, to the “sectarian” pole of a dubiously abstract typology. It should be recalled that far from adopting a “sectarian” attitude toward socialist, or even bourgeois, parties such as the Kuomintang in China, Stalinism endorsed the opposite orientation, subordinating proletarian forces under the leadership of a national bourgeoisie, and deferring the struggle for socialism as an indefinitely distant sequel to a purely bourgeois-democratic revolution. Stalinism, in other words, was “sectarian” only in a tactical sense at specific and limited junctures of its history, and continued to act as the gravedigger of the international revolution when it embraced the opposite posture—opportunism. It is also important to note that some of the early communist victims of Stalinism, such as the Italian Amadeo Bordiga, were by most accounts “sectarian” in their dismissal of party and class alliances. Urban’s Stalinist “sectarians” are moreover oddly counterpoised to “innovators.” This would be merely too abstract, rather than incoherent, were it not for the fact that the “innovators” in Urban’s narrative turn out to be those people and parties (including Togliatti and the PCI) who, far from creating something politically or ideologically new, retraced their steps back to the positions of the Second International. Sectarianism, in other words, is no magic formula to detect Stalinism in theory or to avoid it in practice, because historically Stalinism exhibited and functioned through political traits of the opposite sign.

Urban’s understanding of Stalinism is also too narrow in a different sense, as it excludes forces that were consciously instrumental to its triumph. In her account of the relation between the PCI and Stalinism, Urban identifies Togliatti and the vast majority of the PCI leadership, including Gramsci, as aligned with Bukharin’s right-wing of the Communist Party in Russia and the Comintern. This serves as the basis for their historical and political absolution. According to Urban, the Stalinists outside of the Soviet Union were those who aligned themselves with Stalin in the strictest sense—Ernst Thälmann and Dmitri Manuilsky, for example, but not Jules Humbert-Droz and Palmiro Togliatti. It is true that the distinction between Stalin’s “center”
and Bukharin’s “right” can be an analytically valid one. It is also true that it became politically significant once Stalin moved to liquidate Bukharin and the right wing in the middle of 1928. However, eventual destruction was the typical fate of Stalin’s closest political allies and is thus no certificate of good political conduct or substitute for a conscious, principled opposition to Stalinism from its inception. During a decisive initial period, moreover, Stalin’s center and Bukharin’s right politically acted as one, putting in place the foundation for some of the crucial elements of Stalinism: the crushing of intraparty democracy in the Soviet Union, the gutting of the Comintern as an open political arena for the international communist movement, the routine use of expulsions and other administrative measures, the debasement of Marxism through the theory of “socialism in one country,” and the enforcement of disastrous neo-Menshevik policies in peripheral and colonial settings—most tragically in China. Furthermore, in the Italian case, while Togliatti’s leadership was indeed for a period under threat of liquidation for being “Bukharinist,” unlike the leading groups of other national parties it managed to avoid this fate exactly by adapting itself to Stalin’s political and organizational demands. In other words, the rise (though not the full consolidation) of Stalinism should be traced to the 1923–27 period of struggles against the Left, and then the Joint Opposition, and although most of Bukharin’s “right-wing” would later be crushed, it was nonetheless an internal, constitutive element of Stalinism, as it existed in its early stages.

In sum, Stalinism is a complex phenomenon that needs to be considered in its multifarious aspects. The first, as I have discussed, is the historico-geographical aspect of Stalinism: its beginnings in the Russian party in the mid 1920s, its eventual domination of the Third International and of its national sections, its conscious elimination of the Comintern and the “polycentric” development of these parties toward relative political independence, its sometimes deep interactions with nationalist and petty-bourgeois elements and regimes outside the Soviet Union, and its continuation after Stalin’s death and even after the Soviet collapse.

The second, programmatic aspect of Stalinism is particularly difficult to isolate, since in the course of its political existence Stalinism eclectically zigzagged its way through various “left” and “right” positions on the most important questions of policy. It is necessary to note, however, that nearly from the beginning these swings clearly and demonstrably reached outside the programmatic perimeter established by the early Soviet state under Lenin’s leadership. Among these swings, we could list the neo-Menshevik approach to the Chinese revolution in the mid to late 1920s and the brutal, forced collectivization of the peasantry in the Soviet Union.
The third aspect of Stalinism may be called doctrinal, having to do with the most general elements of theory and principle in the international communist movement. In this respect, Stalinism’s most important point of departure was the theory of socialism in one country, which refurbished the old national-socialist conceptions that had been first expressed in 1879 by Georg von Vollmar, a parliamentary leader of the German SPD’s right wing. Other doctrinal innovations introduced by Stalinism, such as “social fascism” and “peaceful coexistence,” were also important, although of more partial applicability. In the process of developing and imposing these views, Stalinism conducted a long and wide-ranging operation of historical revision and falsification of the early history of the Bolshevik party, the Soviet Union, and the Comintern.

A fourth aspect of Stalinism is the organizational one, dealing with the set of questions concerning the eradication of the democratic elements of “democratic centralism” in the Russian party and in the Comintern, as well as the later adaptation to bourgeois parliamentary democracy outside of the Soviet Union. We should also think of fifth, political aspect of Stalinism, in the sense that it was the outcome of a struggle conducted in the international communist movement by an identifiable, “Stalinist” political faction that prevailed over more and less organized forms of political opposition. Finally, Stalinism had an important social aspect in that it was the expression of the rise of groups in the Soviet Union that were hostile to a revolutionary outlook: mainly the party and state bureaucracy and the embryonic bourgeoisie created by the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the countryside.

Stalinism should be understood as the totality of these aspects, which I can only sketch out here, and cannot be reduced to any single one of them. Its complexity as a phenomenon does not of course invalidate the very real, sometimes brutally direct way in which, at all these levels, Stalinism concentrated the symptoms and forces of degeneration in the communist movement.

Having fixed these few points concerning Stalinism, I will now proceed to consider Gramsci’s relation to it. Following the recent work of a prominent Italian scholar, I will argue that beginning in the mid-1920s, Gramsci occupied a complex intermediate position in the political landscape of the international communist movement. This position cannot be assimilated either to that of the Stalin-Bukharin majority or to the Joint Opposition led by Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Kamenev. While in 1926 Gramsci formally supported the political line of the Stalinist majority, he rather systematically infused its slogans and policies with a distinctive political content that alarmed and angered this majority. This is true with respect to matters of intraparty and Comintern democracy, as well as theoretical and programmatic questions such as socialism in one country and the united front tactic.
Gramsci’s position was thus somewhat evasive. It did not rise to the level of a political opposition that argued and fought openly and resolutely. On one hand, this unwillingness to come out in the open should not be equated to the brazen opportunism and complicity of Togliatti. In 1926, in fact, Gramsci’s position as a leader of the PCI caused considerable political friction with Togliatti, who was then stationed at the Comintern in Moscow and acted on behalf on the Stalinist majority. It is possible, moreover, that Gramsci’s evasive behavior was a tactical maneuver designed to buy time to better prepare a bolder struggle against Stalinism based on broader strategic differences. It is possible, in other words, that Gramsci would have eventually moved to openly confront and oppose Stalinism, and that only his arrest in November 1926 prevented him from doing so. On the other hand, this is destined to remain a conjecture, whereas Gramsci’s formal support of the majority, even if in a way that the majority found equivocal and insufficient, is an indisputable fact.

Before going to prison, then, Gramsci’s political record is mixed. He can be described, at best, as an eclectic and extremely cautious oppositionist—without an explicit program, without the documented intent or courage to break formally with Stalinist positions. At worst, Gramsci can be described as a very recalcitrant and troublesome supporter of Stalinism—clearly and measurably, if not qualitatively, different from Togliatti’s active and enthusiastic support. In either case, the pre-prison Gramsci, while no toady or willing accomplice of Stalinism, fell short of embodying a political alternative to it.

Concerning the years of his imprisonment, I argue that while Gramsci ceased to be an active political force, he continued to reflect on and express judgments about the development of the Soviet Union. Specifically, we can find in the *Prison Notebooks* some elements of an analysis and critique of Stalinism. This critique, however, is severely limited by circumstances that were largely outside of Gramsci’s control. It is limited, first, by the fact that Gramsci ceased to experience this phenomenon first-hand and was only able to gauge it indirectly and from afar. Gramsci, moreover, did not get to see, directly or indirectly, the most spectacular manifestation of Stalinism: the purges of the late 1930s. Second, Gramsci’s critique is limited by the constraints imposed by the prison regime. Gramsci had some privileges, mainly the capacity to read and to write in his notebooks. But these privileges were tightly controlled and regimented, and only allowed Gramsci limited access to political and economic information about the Soviet Union. Third, it is likely that in his notebooks Gramsci exercised a degree of self-censorship on the most pressing political matters. Unlike some of his comrades, Gramsci consciously resolved to obey prison rules and regulations. Moreover, having been ostracized by his comrades, and witnessing the erosion of the epistolary rapport he had maintained
with his relatives, Gramsci began to see his notebooks as the last, delicate thread to some sort of mental sanity. By being politically too blunt or direct in the notebooks, Gramsci would have risked antagonizing the prison authorities, thus jeopardizing the treasured privilege of reading and writing. Finally, and more specifically, even if Gramsci had come to definite, negative political conclusions about Stalinism, to record them openly in his notebooks would have put a powerful weapon of propaganda at the disposal of the fascist regime. In the ideological climate of the 1930s, the continuity between Stalin and the October Revolution was proclaimed with equal assurance (though with different motives) by capitalist democracies, fascists, and by the Soviet regime itself. In this context, it would have been easy for Mussolini to claim that one of the founders and most important figures of Italian communism had at last denounced and renounced the October Revolution and the Soviet Union, rather than its degeneration. For all these reasons, when Gramsci developed an analysis and critique of Stalinism in his notebooks, he did it in a cryptic and indirect fashion and at the cost of political force and theoretical precision.

Gramsci’s analysis and critique of Stalinism in the notebooks is thus difficult to establish conclusively, since it rests on a series of tricky and partially speculative interpretive determinations. Although not without interest and insight, it is also, in my judgment, theoretically insufficient. Finally, it certainly does not rise to the level of a recognizable political alternative that fully diagnosed and openly challenged Stalinism from a Marxist standpoint. In this sense, it exists in a sort of theoretical and political limbo: shadowy rather than fully formed; present, but neither here nor there.

The problem of Stalinism, though no doubt considered passé in many circles, casts a long shadow over all the complex processes by which Marxism appears to us conceivable or inconceivable, central or peripheral, a source of hope or fear. Indeed, as I have tried to show in the case of the contemporary uses of Gramsci, Stalinism defines the terrain of our political knowledge and imagination in ways that we are scarcely aware of. From this standpoint, a “Gramscian” turn cannot be the only, or even the principal, route for Marxism to break out of its impasse. Even once rescued from contemporary distortions, Gramsci cannot bear the full burden of revitalizing Marxism for our time. In such a project Gramsci can play a useful complementary, secondary role and no more.

I. GRAMSCI AS A POLITICAL ALTERNATIVE?

In order to substantiate these claims, I will now proceed to consider Gramsci’s conduct in the struggle that shook the international communist movement
in 1926 before his arrest. In the Soviet Union, the struggle between the Stalin-Bukharin majority and the Joint Opposition reached a fever pitch. Lenin’s “testament,” which had hitherto been suppressed, found its way into print in the West. This document foresaw the danger of a disastrous split within the party, identified in Stalin’s personal and political inadequacy the main source of danger, and proposed that he should be removed from the office of general secretary. The Joint Opposition, which at that time stood politically to the left of the majority, was smashed at all organizational levels and politically decapitated. Trotsky and Kamenev were expelled from the executive of the Russian party, while Zinoviev was removed from the presidency of the Comintern.

In Italy, these political clashes were producing increasingly powerful reverberations. Gramsci and Togliatti were part of a new leadership that had replaced Amadeo Bordiga’s in 1924. But the alignment of forces there did not quite correspond to that of the Comintern. Bordiga’s left opposition in Italy had considerable theoretical and programmatic differences with the Russian left opposition, and the two had cooperated only episodically and on a very limited scale. The new Italian majority leadership was also far from securely aligned to the Russian one. By 1926, only Togliatti stood as a clear exception. As a PCI representative in the Comintern, Togliatti was in close political contact with the Russian majority, particularly Bukharin. Togliatti understood the seriousness of the intraparty crisis, unambiguously took the side of the majority, and throughout 1926 served as the principal mechanism of transmission by which it brought political pressure to bear on the Italian leadership.

A second, more direct and dangerous kind of pressure was also coming to bear on the PCI. The vise of fascist repression was beginning to squeeze the party in a way that closed off the political space available to it and systematically disrupted the most basic organizational, let alone political, tasks. The tremendous difficulty of the Italian situation undoubtedly constituted an incentive for the PCI to deal as quickly and painlessly as possible with the questions raised by the struggle within the Soviet Union. Specifically, as the Russian majority moved to liquidate the Joint Opposition, the PCI leadership at one level could hardly afford to stand in the way of this, express misgivings, or raise even procedural questions about it. Togliatti understood this all too well and acted accordingly. On July 15, 1926, at a meeting of the Russian Communist Party’s Central Committee, Togliatti led the attack against the Joint Opposition, denouncing it as a vulgar power-grabbing “alliance without principles,” and promising that the PCI would conduct a pitiless fight against them. The political conduct of Gramsci and other PCI leaders back in Italy, however, showed that Togliatti had promised more than
he could deliver. These PCI leaders undoubtedly tried to defuse and deflect the question to some degree, by insisting, for example, that they would only discuss the matter of party discipline and not the political merits of the two groupings. Having framed the question in this way, moreover, Gramsci expressed support for the majority, claiming that the Joint Opposition was mainly responsible for the conflict because it violated party discipline and the existing ban on factions. But as time went on, it became increasingly clear to Togliatti as well as the Russian majority that behind the hesitations, temporizing, and qualifications by the Italian leadership, there stood potentially explosive differences.

The PCI's insistence on intervening strictly on the matter of party discipline rather than on the political question initially happened to correspond with the demands of the Russian majority. But in the summer of 1926, when the majority began to insist that national parties had to take a political position on the “Russian question,” the Italians refused to comply. Togliatti's appeals, warnings, and demands, which described vividly the severity of the break within the Russian party and the high stakes involved for all the Communist parties, failed to move the Italian leadership. Gramsci in particular took the lead in refusing to mechanically issue a political endorsement of the Russian majority without a broad and sufficiently long discussion at all levels of the party.

It is important to point out, moreover, that these differences were not a simple matter of disagreement with the method by which the Russian majority was imposing its political will. The question of method was no doubt important. The Italians did insist that the struggle against “factionalism” had to be conducted by the correct means and expressed concern about the heavy-handedness and systematic employment of “administrative measures” on the part of the Stalinist majority. But the differences exceeded questions of method. This is the main contribution of Giuseppe Vacca’s recent work on the 1926 episode, against the weakness of earlier literature. Vacca identifies and discusses both dimensions of the conflict. The first, concerning method, included the set of problems of intraparty and Comintern democracy as well discipline, the formation of factions, the means by which the struggle against them could be conducted, and the privileged position of the Russian party in the Comintern. For the Italians, this involved not just the fate of the Joint Opposition, but also that of Amadeo Bordiga, whose status in the party and the International had become a matter of contention. But the conflict also invested a second, different cluster of substantive issues, beginning with the correct application of the united front tactic in Italy and leading to wider, even more politically charged questions of the relative stabilization of capitalism and the possibility of building socialism in one country.
The conflict over the question of method in 1926 largely took the form of a struggle over Bordiga’s fate. Gramsci and the Italian leadership intended to send Bordiga to the Comintern as a PCI representative. This decision had been taken in June at the PCI congress held in Lyon. Togliatti, voicing the interests and opinion of the Stalinist majority of the Russian party, began to insist that this should not be done. Fearing that Bordiga’s presence in Moscow could cause trouble and threaten the Stalinist control of the Comintern, Togliatti declared that the Bordiga question was to be resolved in the Italian party.\(^{37}\) By this time, Bordiga, who had enjoyed considerable power and influence in the PCI’s early years, had lost a bitter factional struggle within the party and was relegated to its margins.\(^{38}\) But the question of his fate crystallized a measurable difference between Gramsci and the PCI leadership in Italy on one hand, and Togliatti and the Stalinist Russian majority on the other. Togliatti’s initial response to the PCI’s insistence on sending Bordiga to the Comintern is revealing. It seems to assume that the Italians’ intent was to conveniently, if clumsily, sacrifice Bordiga to the factional fires raging in the Soviet Union so as to avoid getting burned themselves. This, Togliatti warned, would not work, because the Russian majority now expressly demanded the opposite course from the PCI.\(^{39}\) Given the earlier conduct of the Italian leadership (himself included), Togliatti’s assumption was not unreasonable.\(^{40}\) But once Gramsci and the rest of the Italian leadership replied, it became clear that Togliatti’s assumption was mistaken.\(^{41}\) In defense of their initial decision concerning Bordiga, the PCI leaders raised several procedural matters and invoked the principle of allowing members of the minority to participate fully in party work. They wrote, “We do not regard sending Bordiga to Moscow as an extraordinary measure to facilitate the struggle against the extreme left in our party or the solution of internal party matters. We believe that, in order to liquidate this left extremism, the communist International will have to use different means . . . we insist in our request to send comrade Bordiga to Moscow.”\(^{42}\)

Although these statements may not have been entirely consistent with the earlier behavior of Gramsci and the Italian leadership, and although they certainly did not represent a momentous political break, they had the force of a relatively bold vindication in the context of the ongoing culmination of the factional struggle. The statements expressed an attitude toward the question of factional dissent that clashed with Stalinism’s increasingly roughshod methods. On September 30, the Stalinist majority in the Comintern’s Secretariat for Latin countries refused to reconsider the matter of Bordiga’s fate. Togliatti’s communication of this decision was conciliatory, indicating that
the PCI would get an opportunity to state its case at the seventh meeting of
the Comintern’s enlarged executive, which was planned for the end of the
year. While the Bordiga question was thus far from settled, the course of
events imposed an abrupt end to this particular strand of the 1926 conflict
between Gramsci and Togliatti. The fascist regime revoked Bordiga’s pass-
port, then arrested him on November 20, 1926.

The matter of intraparty democracy and factional strife, however, was
at the center of the 1926 disagreement between Gramsci and Togliatti in a
more general form as well, separate from the specificities of Bordiga’s case.
The heated epistolary exchange between the two that took place in October
of 1926 revealed their very different understanding of the significance of the
continuing unity of the Russian leadership, and of the reasons and conditions
confering to the Russian party a privileged position in the Comintern. It
was in this exchange that Gramsci’s disagreement over the question of method
pointed more directly to strategic differences of political perspective.

Gramsci assigned an exceptionally high value to the continuing unity of
the Russian party. He wrote of the “grave repercussions” that would result from
a split in the leadership. He warned the Russian comrades, both in the majority
and the minority, of the “irreparable and lethal” potential consequences
of such an outcome. Far from being a mere well-meaning piety, Gramsci’s
position was the endpoint of a specific line of political reasoning. In assessing
the international significance of the Russian question, Gramsci began with the
premise that the masses worldwide were not in a position to follow the prob-
lems, policies, and initiatives of the Soviet state in their complex evolution.
The most tangible and comforting assurance that the USSR was continuing to
move toward socialism was exactly the unity of its ruling Communist party, its
behavior as a “single fighting unit” under the well-known and respected leader-
ship nucleus that along with Lenin had successfully led the Russian working
class to power. It was this unity, moreover, that justified the role played by the
Russian party as the principal, leading force for the “organization and propul-
sion of the revolutionary forces in all countries.”

What was the political force of Gramsci’s intervention from the point
of view of the consolidation of Stalinism? In articulating his position on the
importance of party unity, Gramsci stated that the opposition was “mainly
responsible” for the crisis and accused it of reviving and giving voice to the old
corporatist orientation of the working class that Leninism had to overcome
before it could win the support of the broad masses. Togliatti’s alarmed reac-
tion to Gramsci’s letter, however, revealed just by how much the document
had fallen short of Stalinist demands and expectations. He warned Gramsci
and the others back in Italy that forwarding the document to its intended
recipient, the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party, would have been “extremely inopportune” and begged them to desist. Togliatti, moreover, criticized the content of the letter sternly and in punctilious detail. He argued that the political force of the document would have been wholly to the benefit of the opposition, inspiring it with the hope of finding support internationally and abetting its temporizing and tactical maneuvers.

Why did Togliatti react in this way? First, Gramsci’s letter dared to pay respect to the historical merits of the leaders of the Joint Opposition, who had in the past “potently contributed to our revolutionary education, have at times energetically and sternly corrected us, and have been our teachers.” This simple statement of fact, this expression of sympathy even in the midst of a severe political critique of the opposition, grated intolerably against the prevailing Stalinist legends and falsifications. This climate was the outcome of a long and systematic campaign. Beginning in 1923 soon after Lenin’s death, Stalin and his allies began to unleash and reward increasingly vulgar historical revisionism about Trotsky’s role during and after 1917, as well as increasingly hysterical denunciations against “Trotskyism” as a deviation from and danger to “Leninism.” The passage in Gramsci’s letter stood flamboyantly beyond the pale of the historico-political standards enforced by Stalinism. Nonetheless, however heretical and politically charged the passage might have been, it remained confined to the matter of method. While critical of the opposition, Gramsci retained a certain decorum and basic respect for the historical facts of the October Revolution. But the letter was objectionable for other reasons as well.

According to Togliatti, the root cause of the dangerous mistakes in Gramsci’s letter was its insistence on the crucial importance of party unity. Regardless of its political merits and justifications, it was the Stalinist majority that was in the process of splitting the old leadership nucleus by means of expulsions and other administrative measures. Togliatti slyly reminded Gramsci not only of the general necessity for iron Bolshevik discipline, but also of how they themselves had enforced it earlier in the struggle against Bordiga. Togliatti insisted that the principal, decisive question was that of the correctness of the political line, not the unity of the party. He demanded that if the PCI was in fact fully behind the majority line, it had to state this unambiguously and without insisting on the need for a unity that was in any case a thing of the past. This was a matter of political substance, not of method or etiquette. To argue, as Gramsci did, that the break in the unity of the Russian leadership would have disastrous consequences amounting to the loss of the single, manifest signal that the USSR was working toward socialism was tantamount to calling into question the capacity of the Stalinist
majority to lead the international movement once it finished off the minor-
ity. The same implicit heresy lurked behind Gramsci’s point about the privi-
leged role and function of the Russian party. If this depended on the unity 
of the leadership nucleus, then the Stalinist majority, in spite of the formal 
correctness of its political positions, by liquidating the minority was relin-
quishing its claim to a leading international role. The relative influence and 
organizational weight of various national sections of the International could 
all be called into question, reassessed, and perhaps renegotiated. Against the 
background of spiraling centralization and the depredation of the Comin-
tern’s faculties to aggregate and sort out relatively independent national per-
spectives, Gramsci’s position appeared as an intrepid challenge to Stalinism, 
though it certainly was not presented in this spirit.

By warning of catastrophic consequences, Gramsci had in a sense cor-
rectly sized up the significance of the struggle that was taking place in the 
Russian party and throughout the International. On this point, Gramsci 
did not mince words in his October 14 letter. He warned the Russians that, 
“Today you are destroying your accomplishments, you are damaging and run 
the risk of erasing the leading function that the Russian communist party 
conquered for itself thanks to Lenin’s initiative.” But in a different sense, 
at least in his letters to Togliatti, Gramsci did not fully appreciate the mag-
nitude and significance of this situation. By 1926, the crisis in the Russian 
party crystallized the general crisis in the international communist move-
ment: the failure of the revolution to extend westward, the backwardness and 
isolation of the Soviet Union, the bureaucratization of the party and state 
apparatus, and the strains in the alliance between the debilitated Russian 
working class and a peasantry that included an increasingly powerful, hostile 
upper crust. By failing to put this reality into focus, Gramsci effectively acted 
as though the conflict could be wished away. Though at one level cognizant 
of the highest stakes of the struggle, he was still caught preaching concili-
ationism in mid-air, trying to float above the political contradictions that 
the largely unfavorable unfolding of events after the revolution had made 
unavoidable and irreconcilable.

When Togliatti’s response forcefully snapped him out of this stupor by 
reminding him that there was not going to be a middle ground, Gramsci spir-
itedly defended some of his ideas, but also made some critical concessions. 
First, he regretted that Togliatti had misunderstood his intentions, since the 
letter “was directed in its entirety against the opposition.” Gramsci, after all, 
genuinely disagreed with the opposition, which for him did constitute a dan-
ger and a threat. He thought that the danger could not be solved by means 
of expulsions and liquidations. The opposition was an evil, but a necessary
one because it allowed the party to preserve its capacity to sense and reflect, to express and mediate the complex and contradictory alliance between the Russian working class and the peasantry. Confronted by Togliatti’s sobering arguments, Gramsci admitted that the opposition was not absolutely necessary after all. While he reiterated the importance of party unity, Gramsci conceded that the split “would not be the end of the world”—that is, it would not necessarily lead to an irreparable disaster. Political life for the International, the PCI, and Gramsci himself would go on, though no doubt under more unpleasant and difficult circumstances. Gramsci would have an opportunity to reflect on this tragic existential dimension of Stalinism years later while in prison. He would write of how harsh circumstances could set in motion a slow but profound mutation, a gnawing, imperceptible drift from the resolute, absolute abhorrence of “cannibalism,” to its practice, however unpleasant, so that life could go on. “The drama for such a person,” wrote Gramsci, is that “he can sense the process of decay . . . and he thinks: if this happens, at a certain point I will kill myself to prevent it. But when will this ‘point’ be?” Although Gramsci was far more sensitive than the majority of the Stalinist majority to this danger, by October 1926, under tremendous pressure, he was beginning to approach this point himself. The formal contradiction between the gloomy predictions of the first letter and this later admission expresses the historical weakness of Gramsci’s position: his attempt to finesse and work around the edges of a rapidly consolidating system that demanded complete submission; his attempt to oppose Stalinism without organizing a political opposition.

Life, in any case, did not go on—at least not in the way Gramsci would have hoped. Gramsci had agreed to Togliatti’s request to not to forward the October 14 letter, provided that he, along with his Italian comrades, would get a chance to discuss the matter at the upcoming meeting of the Comintern’s enlarged executive in Moscow, and, before then, at the preparatory meeting of the PCI’s Central Committee, which would take place in the first three days of November. Having received from Togliatti more information and documentation on the matter, Gramsci had been chosen to deliver a report and draft a PCI resolution on the Russian question. On October 31, however, a failed attempt on Mussolini’s life caused another tightening of the vise of fascist repression. On the way to the meeting of the Central Committee, Gramsci realized that he was under close surveillance and returned to Rome. He was arrested a few days later. As in the case of the Bordiga question, the differences between Gramsci and Togliatti were abruptly resolved by fascism.

Without Gramsci, the meeting of the PCI Central Committee, and indeed the fate of the party, took a sharp and decisive turn. Alarmed by
Gramsci’s letter, the Stalinist majority entrusted Humbert-Droz to take care of the Italian situation. He had personally replied to Gramsci, attempting to reassure him, and was sent to participate in the same meeting that Gramsci was unable to attend. It is difficult to divine what Gramsci’s conduct at this meeting would have been. Vacca argues rather convincingly that there is little reason to believe that Gramsci would have failed to defend his position, as stated to Togliatti, and simply adapted to Moscow’s demands. The terms of the political divergence probably would not have dramatically deviated from what is expressed in the exchange between Gramsci and Togliatti. Even so, it is precisely Gramsci’s position, particularly when qualified by his later admission to Togliatti that the final break with the opposition would not be “the end of the world,” that suggests that, at best, the outcome of the meeting would have been another uncomfortable stalemate. Whatever Gramsci’s intention may have been, his absence at the meeting resulted in the PCI leadership’s rapid capitulation to Stalinism. Gramsci’s letter was not even mentioned. Humbert-Droz spoke first, articulating the majority’s position in a way that added nothing to what Togliatti had already related in his letters. Speaking on behalf of the Central Committee, Ruggero Grieco declared that after Humbert-Droz’s “sufficient, complete exposition,” the PCI Central Committee could at last take a position on the Russian question and proceeded to express its full political agreement with the Stalinist majority.

I have so far followed two strands of the 1926 disagreement between Gramsci and Togliatti. The first, beginning from the concrete question of what to do with Bordiga, concerned the proper method of struggle against the opposition. The second, beginning from the relative importance of the continuing unity of the Russian party, reached more strategic political differences. There was also a third cluster of differences between, on one hand, Gramsci as the head of the Italian leadership, and on the other, Togliatti and Stalinism. Its most immediate manifestation was the programmatic question of how to concretely implement the tactic of the “united front.” But this question also pointed to a significant difference on the broader matter of the alleged relative stabilization of capitalism. This latter issue was one of the most important terrains of struggle between the majority and the opposition in the Soviet Union, and in turn pointed to the strategic and theoretical core of the struggle: the Stalinist idea of “socialism in one country.”

The united front tactic had been introduced at the Third World Congress of the Comintern. It was part of a general maneuver of retreat and retrenchment that found another expression in the New Economic Policy.
Gramsci and Trotsky in the Shadow of Stalinism

form of engagement with them. This was not intended, however, to suspend the necessary criticism of the political consequences of reformism, particularly of how the reformist trade union bureaucracy had continued to perform invaluable services for their respective national capitalist regimes. It was not a question of uniting “from above,” uncritically attaching the cart of the Communist movement to the reformist leadership in the trade unions. Rather, the united front was understood as operating mainly “from below.” The communist forces in the trade unions would engage the reformist leaders, and would propose very aggressively a unified line and joint initiatives. But they did so in order to better expose these reformists’ treachery and win the allegiance of workers in their organizations. The goal was to demonstrate to the workers who were part of the reformist trade unions and parties that their leadership was incapable of waging an effective struggle and was in practice against working class unity.

In Italy, the implementation of the united front had been especially contentious from the beginning. Bordiga and his leadership circle had opposed it openly and fiercely. In June 1922, Gramsci had himself defended Bordiga’s position on this point at the second meeting of the Comintern’s enlarged executive. Even after Bordiga had lost the helm of the party, and after Gramsci had changed his political orientation and formally accepted the united front tactic, its actual implementation remained a thorny issue.

In 1924 and 1925, reacting against fascist measures that had restricted trade union organization, the PCI reorganized its trade union presence by creating a structure that paired bodies called “Comitati di difesa sindacale” (trade union defense committees) to a parallel structure of “Comitati di agitazione” (agitation committees). While the former had a purely “defensive” purpose—organizing and participating in a broad cross-party alliance to defend all trade unions against fascist repression—the latter expressed the “offensive” purpose of building a specifically Communist and revolutionary presence in the trade unions, partly by criticizing reformist tendencies. This organizational structure was suspected of violating the framework of the united front, at least as Stalinists understood it at the time.

At the beginning of 1926, during the PCI’s Third National Congress, Togliatti directly oversaw the work dealing with trade union policies. He made sure that changes would be implemented so that the Communists would adhere to a single, cross-party, defensive organizational form in the trade unions. In other words, the united front, in the hands of the Stalinist majority, had been reinterpreted to function very much “from above.” Once Togliatti left for Moscow, however, he realized that the Italian leadership had veered away from this interpretation by stealthily reintroducing in the party
program the distinction between the two organizational forms. Togliatti was once again put in a difficult situation. As he professed in the name of the entire PCI complete adherence to the Stalinist line, the leadership back in Italy continued to consistently, if not ostentatiously, deviate from it in practice. At first, Togliatti demanded an explanation and a correction of this policy. The Italian leadership reacted somewhat disingenuously, expressing surprise that such a difference had arisen and attempting to explain it as one of form rather than substance. Unsatisfied, Togliatti personally set into motion the full force of the Comintern apparatus to ensure that the PCI would conform to the Stalinist policy. He personally intervened at a reunion of the Comintern's Presidium devoted to the trade union question. Togliatti fully and boisterously accepted the majority's interpretation of the united front as wholly "defensive" and "from above," and in doing so accepted the criticism levied against the PCI, although he did his best to minimize its scope.

As was the case in the other points of dissent in 1926, Gramsci and the Italian leadership, while doing everything possible to avoid a direct confrontation, were again deviating from a Stalinist dictum in practice. Once Togliatti helped to direct the spotlight of the Comintern squarely on their unorthodox conduct, Gramsci and the PCI retreated. But again they did so somewhat equivocally, in a way that once more attempted to cover lingering substantive differences behind a formal agreement. Mauro Scoccimarro, on behalf of the Italian leadership, wrote back to Togliatti conceding every point of the Comintern's criticism, and for all that still upholding the distinction between the defense committees and the agitation committees. This move proved effective. After this exchange in early May, this particular controversy subsided. Vacca concludes that Scoccimarro's concession must not have been sincere and that the resolution was in fact largely formal, since the PCI in practice ignored the Comintern's scolding and persisted with its separate organization of trade union activities.

The differences over the implementation of the united front tactic were the most immediate manifestation of a broader and more important divergence between Gramsci and Stalinism. The interpretation of the united front "from above" and the notion of a purely defensive political posture rested on a specific, and relatively pessimistic, strategic assessment of the contemporary revolutionary prospects. The Stalinist majority had begun to elaborate this assessment in 1925, at the fifth meeting of the Comintern's enlarged executive. Revising the Comintern's earlier optimistic positions, Bukharin presented the thesis of a "relative stabilization" of capitalism, which was offered as a sober acknowledgement of the political defeat in Germany, as well as of the general economic recovery of capitalism.
and economic terrain had shifted so unfavorably, the communist movement was called to adopt significantly different, that is, “defensive,” political strategies and expectations. The Italian Communist Party, as was typically the case in its early history, was not inclined to heed such calls. Gramsci in particular, who was present at the proceedings, refused to endorse Bukharin’s position and immediately became the target of personal attacks. Dmitri Manuilsky, for instance, described him as a conspiratorially minded “carbonaro.”

By 1926, the PCI and Gramsci, however passive and cautious in their conduct, continued to manifest a lingering skepticism toward the strategic assessment propounded by Stalinism. A report prepared by Gramsci for an August 1926 meeting of the Italian leadership reveals the scope and substance of the divergence. In it, Gramsci quite openly called into question Bukharin’s conclusion about the “so-called” relative stabilization of capitalism. He first noted some important signs of a sharpening economic crisis in Italy under fascism. He then registered a generalized leftist shift of the middle classes and a political radicalization of the democratic parties in opposition to fascism. Having diagnosed the Italian situation in this way, Gramsci consequently refused to endorse the Comintern majority’s purely defensive strategy. Instead, he argued that both the “phase” of the capitalist economy and the political tasks at hand were of an “intermediate” sort. In clear contrast with the Stalinist majority, Gramsci meant that the prospect of the Italian working class coming to power, while not already present-at-hand, remained very much on the agenda. Gramsci did not exclude that the political successor to fascism may be a dictatorship of the proletariat, and insisted that the intermediate, “democratic” parties were in any case not “capable of giving even the most minimal satisfaction to the economic demands of the working classes.” Nonetheless, he thought that this direct revolutionary leap remained improbable. A “democratic interlude” after the fall of fascism was the more probable outcome, and the party needed to work “from this very moment” so that this intermediary stage would “last as short a time as possible.” In making these claims, Gramsci emphasized the necessity for a “struggle against trade-union bureaucracy” and even asserted the need to insist on the question of “Factory Councils and workers control.”

This “intermediate” outlook on Italian politics was thus not in line with the Stalinist strategy at the time. It rested on a different, more optimistic assessment of the capitalist “phase,” demanded a far more aggressive “offensive” political strategy in the trade unions as well as on other fronts, and continued to insist on the need to prepare a revolutionary breakthrough.

Gramsci’s different strategic assessment, moreover, was not limited to Italy. His report explained that the political and economic crisis of Italian
fascism expressed, in a particularly sharp form, conditions that applied to all
the countries at the periphery of European capitalism. Gramsci was thus
not merely trying to claim a national exception to the rule spelled out in
Moscow, but in fact sketched out a broader alternative analysis that rejected
the parameters of the strategic assessment put forth by Stalinism. Further-
more, even on the crucial question of the revolutionary prospects in advanced
capitalist countries such as England, we find Gramsci offering a divergent
assessment, although in this case mitigated by a notable agreement with the
Stalinists on the necessary policy. Like the Joint Opposition, Gramsci empha-
sized the potential significance of the dramatic May 1926 general strike in
England, which called into question the grim Stalinist assessment of the cur-
rent phase. Gramsci’s remark that this question “should be discussed” ought
to be regarded as politically significant when seen against the background of
the Comintern majority’s intolerance for dissent at the time. For Gramsci,
however, the question remained an open one and did not warrant a change
in the existing political line imposed by Stalinism in England, which had
remained shackled to the “defensive” Anglo-Soviet Committee even after its
shameful conduct during the strike.

In sum, Gramsci’s analysis of the phase of capitalist development was
different from the one propounded by Stalinism with its notion of a rela-
tive capitalist stabilization. This was true in the case of Italy and many other
countries in the European periphery of capitalism, and in a more qualified
way even in the case of advanced capitalist countries like England. Gramsci’s
analysis, moreover, was tied to a general assessment of the political strat-
egy necessary for the international communist movement that was also not
aligned with the Stalinist majority. But even leaving aside the specific con-
clusions, Gramsci’s very approach in arriving at them constituted a remark-
able deviation from Stalinism. This approach was “differential” in the sense
that it did not seek to deduce a uniform political strategy for the international
communist movement based on the general assessment of the economic
“phase”—a political “offensive” everywhere in a time of economic crisis, a
“defensive” retrenchment everywhere in a time of stabilization. Instead, the
strategy had to be tailored regionally, based on a country’s structural position
in the world economy. This approach was also “differential” because it was
predicated on a fundamental judgment about the peculiarity of conditions in
the advanced capitalist countries. Gramsci noted that in these countries, “the
ruling class possesses political and organizational resources that it did not
possess, for example, in Russia.” Consequently, “even the most serious eco-

For this reason, in the West it would be neither possible nor desirable simply
to index the political behavior of the revolutionary party to the relative economic condition of capitalism. The party’s duty to prepare the revolution in Western countries would have to be conceived as substantially detached from the fluctuations in the economic “phase” of capitalism. This is the line of argument that would more famously reappear in those passages of the Notebooks where Gramsci discusses the need for a war of position in the advanced capitalist countries. There, as in this case, Gramsci’s argument was not an attempt to inject reformism and gradualism into the Third International. Rather, the force of the argument, particularly in the context of Gramsci’s “offensive” strategic leanings in opposition to the Stalinist line, was that, at least in the capitalist West, the conquest of power was always on the agenda, regardless of the particular economic ebb and flow of capitalism. Whatever its actual merits may have been, this outlook was far removed from that of the Stalinist majority in the Comintern. Vacca concludes, perhaps going too far, that the crucial implication of Gramsci’s “differential” analysis was to expose the category of relative stabilization as “useless.” In any case, in rejecting—or at least severely limiting—the applicability of “relative stabilization,” Gramsci also undercut one of the fundamental premises and justifications for the other cornerstone of Stalinism: socialism in one country.

By 1926, the notion of socialism in one country was very much at the heart of the struggles between Stalinism and the Left, then Joint Opposition. Indeed, once the Stalinist majority demanded that all the national communist parties intervene on the Russian question, they were expected not only to definitively condemn the positions of the Joint Opposition, but to also enshrine “socialism in one country” as the guiding principle of the communist movement. The notion of socialism in one country had been originally proposed in the party debates by Stalin toward the end of 1924. He had done so with tentativeness and reservations, since the notion could only be made to agree with Lenin’s original positions through the most severe philological contortions. One year later, theoretically buttressed by Bukharin’s concept of “relative stabilization,” Stalin sought unsuccessfully to have his theory officially sanctioned by the main institutions of the Communist movement. Stalin finally succeeded in late 1926, when the enlarged executive of the Comintern that Gramsci could not attend officially adopted it.

The crucial impulse behind socialism in one country was retrenchment: to paper over the defeats of the international communist movement, presenting them as a mere turn in the economic phase; to look with increasing indifference on the prospect of revolutionary breakthroughs outside the Soviet Union, while simultaneously purging the Comintern and each national section of any independence of thought and action; and to redefine
socialism as the outcome of a nearly automatic economic-administrative process that could take place strictly within the confines of the Soviet Union, provided Western military interference could be warded off. On all these accounts, Gramsci’s August 1926 report can be read as an implicit critique of socialism in one country.

First, the report very much maintained the possibility of a revolutionary outcome not only in Italy, but also in the peripheral countries as well as England. Second, the report could also be read as Gramsci’s attempt to develop for the PCI an independent, different analysis and method of its own, rather than simply adapting to the protocols coming from Moscow. Third, this independent method arrived at substantive conclusions that were very much predicated on the need to maintain and develop the capacity of non-Russian communist parties to think and act for themselves. Fourth, Gramsci’s “special emphasis” on the necessity of the slogan of the “United Soviet States of Europe” in the August 1926 report could also have been significant. This was another important, although at this stage somewhat subdued, front of the struggle between the Stalinist majority and the Joint Opposition over the question of socialism in one country, and it is possible that Gramsci’s emphasis signals once more his conflicted relationship with the Stalinist perspective.

In addition to the August report, Gramsci’s fierce exchange with Togliatti in October 1926 also involved the question of socialism in one country, although more obliquely. Gramsci’s October 14 letter to the Central Committee of the Russian party did raise the question of the relationship between the prospect of world revolution and the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union. As we have seen, the letter called into question both the international perception and the effective capacity of the Russian party to build socialism if the impending fracture of its leadership were to occur. Gramsci’s harsh response to Togliatti’s rebuke, moreover, insisted that the march toward socialism of the Russian party should not be thought of as “acquired once and for all in a stable form,” but was, on the contrary, “always unstable.”

Taken as a whole, as Vacca explains:

. . . the way in which Gramsci understood his support of the [Stalinist] majority, increased its international responsibilities, while at the same time tied such responsibilities to the capacity to sustain an effective balance between political centralization of the international process, and the full development of each communist party on its own national terrain. Gramsci’s position can thus be summed up in the formula more centralism and more autonomy—which is a paradox only in a superficial sense.
This assessment, which I regard as correct, establishes once again a measurable distance between Gramsci and the willing, enthusiastic Stalinism of Togliatti. Nonetheless, whether in the Italian case (with the application of the united front) or in the English case (with the continued support of the Anglo-Soviet Committee), Gramsci’s divergent strategic outlook never produced a sharp, open programmatic break with Stalinism. On the specific matter of socialism in one country, which crystallized in a compact formula the manifold ways in which Stalinism represented a dangerous theoretical and political degeneration, Gramsci’s divergence remained implicit, between the lines.103

I have explained, following Vacca, that in 1926, up until the time of his arrest, Gramsci was engaged in a sort of opposition—for the most part passive, equivocal, and expressed sotto voce—to many of the Stalinist demands and positions that were being articulated by Togliatti. Disagreements on concrete questions such as the fate of Amadeo Bordiga and the implementation of the united front tactic in Italy pointed to a broader strategic divergence. This involved questions of political method, such as intraparty and Comintern democracy and the privileged position of the Russian party in it, as well as substance, as in the case of relative stabilization and socialism in one country. The apex of this conflict was reached in the exchange with Togliatti in October 1926, which took place after Gramsci had finally taken a position on the Russian question in a way that was unacceptable for the Stalinist majority. Gramsci’s arrest prevented a proper denouement. Had Gramsci been free to intervene at Valpolicella and later at the meeting of the enlarged executive of the Comintern, he would probably have insisted on his (equivocal) positions. In any case, and here my assessment departs from Vacca’s, it also likely that as the Stalinist majority refused to accept anything short of full capitulation, Gramsci would have acquiesced to the liquidation of the Joint Opposition—a group with whom, in any case, Gramsci disagreed on many fundamental points. For all these reasons, while Gramsci at nearly every turn managed to antagonize Stalinism, he did not and does not represent a political alternative to it. Gramsci’s political evolution, however, stopped short of an unfortunate turn toward “cannibalism,” although this is partially due to reasons that were outside of his control. Forcibly removed from the political struggle, Gramsci wrote with bitterness that was perhaps in part self-directed about the “responsibility of those who, having been in a position to prevent it, failed to do so.”

II. GRAMSCI’S ANALYSIS OF STALINISM IN THE NOTEBOOKS

In the same note, Gramsci also wrote about the importance of studying Stalinism, of making sense of this terrible phenomenon’s “special and voluntary,”
“systematically prepared” and “terroristic” character. I will now consider the question of Gramsci’s success in understanding and developing a cogent theory of Stalinism as a complex phenomenon. I follow the recent work of Francesco Benvenuti and Silvio Pons in arguing that Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* contain a partly concealed body of commentary on the development of the Soviet Union, as well as some elements of an analysis of Stalinism. It will be recalled that Gramsci’s *Notebooks*, particularly on the question of the Soviet Union, suffer from a number of limitations derived from the timing and the conditions under which they were produced. Because of these limitations, the attempt to find a theory of Stalinism in the *Notebooks* remains a speculative enterprise, as was the case in the political assessment of the 1926 conflict with Togliatti.

More specifically, two obstacles stand in the way of a full appreciation of Gramsci’s commentary on Stalinism and the Soviet Union. First, the Soviet Union is hardly ever present in the *Notebooks* in a straightforward way. Instead, it is often blurred or hidden behind a screen of historical and geographical vagueness. Reading Gramsci’s *Notebooks* often induces, probably in accordance to the wishes of the author, a sense of confusion and disorientation. The text might surreptitiously shift from, say, a discussion of the role of the Jacobins in the French Revolution to general observations about revolutionary parties, then appear to veer toward the Soviet experience without explicit signposts for these transitions. In other instances, we might find Gramsci reflecting on the fascist experience in Italy and its “totalitarianism” and then shifting to considerations about other kinds of totalitarianism with a generic tone and cryptic language. The Soviet Union, therefore, is arguably present in the *Notebooks*, but in a ghostly way. The second obstacle is that some of the most celebrated passages in the *Notebooks* appear to criticize not Stalin, but his most famous opponent Leon Trotsky, and do so rather fiercely. There are, however, good reasons to go beyond such appearances. Benvenuti and Pons provide a number of useful arguments on this score, concluding that Trotsky’s function in Gramsci’s text is actually that of a “lightning rod,” which allowed Gramsci to criticize Stalin’s policies indirectly in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Gramsci’s critique of Stalinism, concealed in part behind fulminations against Trotsky, and in part behind a veil of historical and political vagueness, can nonetheless be located. Specifically, returning to my earlier discussion of Stalinism, one can find in the *Notebooks* a critique of its doctrinal, and especially organizational and programmatic aspects. The first is found mostly in Gramsci’s critique of Bukharin’s theoretical writings on historical materialism. The second is found in a series of notes that deal with the problem
of totalitarianism, the destruction of intraparty democracy, and the bureaucratization of the Soviet Union. The third is found in Gramsci’s critique of the “third period” turn imposed by Stalinism on the domestic and foreign policy of the USSR. Although these critiques are somewhat intertwined in Gramsci’s text, I will briefly sketch out each one based on Benvenuti and Pons’ argument.

Gramsci’s “doctrinal” critique is fairly explicit and the least difficult to establish. It is mainly articulated in a series of notes criticizing Bukharin’s attempt to systematize and popularize Marxism. In these notes, Gramsci registered and reflected upon not just Bukharin’s work, but the theoretical inadequacy and degradation of official Marxism in the Soviet Union. Gramsci’s critique, moreover, linked this specifically theoretical degeneration to a broader process of degeneration that invested other areas of Soviet development. In particular, it involved both the “organizational” question of the bureaucratization and the erosion of democracy in the Soviet regime, as well as, “programmatically,” the collapse of the NEP regime as a result of the forced collectivization of the Stalinist third period.

Gramsci found Bukharin's expositions of Marxism wanting in many respects: as a weak critique of idealist subjectivism prevalent among intellectuals; as a relapse into the facile, ineffective arguments of vulgar materialism; as based on an incorrect understanding of the place of dialectics in the philosophical apparatus of Marxism; as a capitulation to the prevailing and vulgar common sense of the age; as inadequate in its conception of linguistic phenomena; as confused on the standing of theory, philosophy and sociology, and unable to deliver on the promise to develop a theory of historical materialism; and finally as unable to explain and defend the contention that society is more than the mere sum of its individual parts. Gramsci interpreted these failings alternatively as “dogmatic, sophistic, positivistic.” This is not an assessment that Gramsci reserved for Bukharin. In a different note, he reached a similar conclusion while discussing “the most recent developments of the philosophy of praxis” (i.e. Marxism) on the specific question of the relation between theory and practice. Gramsci was referring, without naming names, to Stalin, who in 1930–31 had been involved in certain philosophical debates in the Russian party. Gramsci considered Stalin’s notion of theory as complementary or auxiliary to practice as reflecting “mechanical” and “relatively primitive” conceptions. Gramsci’s critique was not merely directed against Bukharin or Stalin’s personal failings as theoreticians, but against the “state of the art,” such as it was, of theoretical and intellectual production in the Soviet Union, especially its development of Marxism. It is at this level that Gramsci’s complaints about
the poverty of Soviet theory assume a definite significance with respect to the question of Stalinism.

The “mechanistic” elements of Soviet theory, according to Gramsci, should be understood as one “aspect of the political question concerning intellectuals.” The fact that Stalin conceived theory as the distinct complement of practice signaled for Gramsci not merely theoretical backwardness, but a “break, or loss of contact” in the dialectical process by which the new ruling class in the Soviet Union produced and expressed itself through its own intellectual and leadership strata. Gramsci granted that “fatalism” and “mechanical determinism” before the conquest of power on the part of the subaltern—that is to say, the working class and peasantry in political alliance—could be a source of strength, as a kind of “faith” in the inevitable eventual victory of socialism. But its lingering presence in the official ideology after the conquest of power signaled that the “subaltern” was unable to feel its own collective existence or function as a conscious historical actor through its political leadership. It was therefore a symptom of a prevailing passivity, of a failure in the mechanisms of transmission that connected the masses to the political leadership in the Soviet state. At the same time, the fatalism of the intellectual and political leadership was more than a mere symptom. Gramsci also regarded it as the “cause of passivity, of imbecile self-sufficiency.” This “passivity,” in other words, had its “active,” negative origin in the political and intellectual leadership of the Soviet Union.

Gramsci, moreover, tied the weaknesses of the Soviet leadership’s ideological outlook to its “active,” and in fact reckless, policy: the forced collectivization of the Stalinist third period turn. Gramsci developed this argument, without explicit political referents, by discussing the political attitude of “aversion to compromises” as a form of economism—that is, “an iron conviction in the objective laws of historical development . . . paired to a near-religious conclusory fatalism.” Gramsci noted that “fatalistic” convictions were tied to the tendency to later resort “blindly and thoughtlessly to the regulatory faculty of arms.” The curious link between a mechanical and fatalistic theory and the most reckless actions aimed at resolving political difficulties once and for all is discussed by Gramsci in a way that, though indirect, leaves little to the imagination. He explained the senselessness of trying to solve the problems in the alliance between the working class and peasantry in the Soviet Union militarily by means of forced collectivization. This abandonment of the patient hegemonic work of compromises and sacrifices could not succeed, and in fact threatened to irreparably crack what Gramsci considered to be the foundation of the Soviet regime: Lenin’s New Economic Policy.
Gramsci’s critique of the poverty of official Soviet theory was therefore connected to a critique of the disastrous policies of the third period. This connection between theoretical failings and practical recklessness also appeared in another note, though in a less pointed fashion. In it, Gramsci attacked Bukharin’s theory for its penchant for seeking easy polemical victories against secondary and minor bourgeois ideologists instead of taking on “the great champions of the opposing tendency.” Gramsci then alluded to the fact that behind this intellectual weakness lurked the inability to distinguish between ideological and politico-military struggles. Only in the latter would assaults against weak points be justified and effective. Bukharin’s “confusion” was symptomatic of the same orientation that, when unable to sustain and preserve the delicate balance of hegemony, began to smash things into place.127

In sum, out of some of Gramsci’s notes, particularly those that criticize Bukharin’s theoretical work, emerges something that approaches a critique of the “doctrinal” aspect of Stalinism. This critique, however, is not only limited to a very specific doctrinal aspect of Stalinism, but also remains a slippery, fragile construct. It will be sufficient to mention two examples of its fragility. First, Gramsci seems to describe the “economic-corporatist” weakness of Soviet theory as growing pains—an inevitable, but perhaps temporary stage.128 It is possible, in other words, that on this score Gramsci does not detect, let alone criticize, Stalinism as a momentous break in revolutionary and communist continuity. Benvenuti and Pons are aware of this problem and seek to resolve it on the basis of a later note in which Gramsci’s judgment seems to veer away from the idea of an “inevitable,” that is to say understandable and temporary, theoretical debasement of official Soviet Marxism toward a less forgiving and optimistic assessment. Gramsci’s note laments the disastrous neglect of the “superstructural” development in the Soviet Union, which is thus allowed to proceed in a “casual and sporadic” way.129 According to Benvenuti and Pons, this note signals the onset of Gramsci’s deeper skepticism about the eventual overcoming of the economic-corporatist phase in the Soviet Union, coupled with his stronger emphasis on the “hegemonic deficit” afflicting the Soviet Union under Stalinism.130 Though Benvenuti and Pons’s argument on this specific question is certainly plausible, it involves an interpretive leap, since this note stops short of an explicit and unambiguous disavowal of the way in which Gramsci had previously introduced the “necessity” of an economic-corporatist phase.131

A second reason to question the firm and reliable presence of a doctrinal critique of Stalinism in the Notebooks has to do with timing and the role of Bukharin. Benvenuti and Pons argue that Gramsci’s polemic against Bukharin’s “saggio popolare” should be read as a critique of “postleninist
bolshevism.”132 But in fact, Gramsci’s criticism most often refers to a text Bukharin wrote in 1921, when Lenin was alive and at the helm of the Bolshevik party. Bukharin’s text, moreover, was neither denounced nor marginalized by the rest of the Bolsheviks. Consequently, it would be possible to argue that Gramsci’s critique of the primitiveness of official Soviet Marxism makes no particular distinction between Leninism, post-Leninism, or Stalinism, and that all the theoretical faults registered by Gramsci applied in 1921 as well as in the early 1930s. His critique of the poverty of official Marxism as symptom as well as active source of profound problems, in other words, could refer retrospectively to the full experience of the Soviet regime, from the early stages of Soviet rule.

This interpretation, although plausible at some abstract level, would be weaker than that offered by Benvenuti and Pons. Gramsci’s critique of the practice (as well as the theory) of the third period from the standpoint of preserving the NEP, as I will soon discuss, extends to many other notes and is moreover confirmed by the facts we know about Gramsci’s stay in prison.133

The fact that Gramsci discussed Bukharin’s 1921 text and the later 1931 text as a sort of continuous whole in all likelihood does not signal a sweeping, negative assessment of the postrevolutionary experience. Gramsci, in fact, very openly wrote of Lenin as the most important theorist of hegemony, providing a significant contrast with his treatment of Bukharin as the theorist of its endangerment and demise.134 Bukharin is a natural candidate for this role in Gramsci’s text, as an actual Soviet leader directly associated with this outcome and as a more general symbol for it, particularly once we consider the significance of the two texts Gramsci criticizes. Both in 1921 and in 1931, although under very different circumstances, Bukharin stood for ultraleft positions, as a sort of theorist of ineffective frontal assaults.135 Gramsci’s critique of Bukharin’s theory likely registers a crucial degeneration. If the economic-corporatism lamented by Gramsci was present from the beginning of the Soviet regime, it was only as a “temptation” that expressed itself through the initial ultraleftism of Bukharin and his faction. This temptation was politically defeated and held in check by the hegemonic outlook and program of Lenin’s New Economic Policy and only came to capture Soviet policy during the Stalinist third period. As a leader and a theorist, Bukharin usefully encapsulated the totality of this process.136 These complexities demonstrate again that Benvenuti and Pons’s argument about the larger significance of Gramsci’s critique of Bukharin, while probably correct, is a fragile construct that requires a series of difficult interpretive displacements and contortions.137

The second strand of Gramsci’s critique of Stalinism in the Notebooks deals with its organizational aspect. Gramsci discusses the Soviet Union as a
form of totalitarianism, reflecting on its bureaucratic degeneration and on the elimination of intraparty democracy.

According to Benvenuti and Pons, Gramsci’s later notes, beginning from 1932 in the face of the Stalinist “revolution from above,” display a mix of support and critical distance. It is important to be clear about the kind of support and critical distance that can be plausibly read into Gramsci’s reflections. His was a Marxist, not liberal-pluralist or “democratic-socialist” critique of the Soviet Union. His support for revolution and for the dictatorship of the proletariat in the abstract, and of the October Revolution as its concrete expression, is never withdrawn or called into question. Gramsci never advocated a policy of class-collaboration with the bourgeoisie and never adopted a reformist understanding of socialism as growing from within the institutions of bourgeois democracy. Gramsci’s use of the concept of totalitarianism can be especially confusing on this score. In one sense, the term was used by Gramsci as a statement of fact, describing the one-party character of the Soviet Union—a trait that Gramsci did not categorically reject, and in fact supported, in so far as it described the experience of the early Soviet regime under Lenin. But even in its more normative sense, Gramsci’s use of “totalitarianism” does not automatically cast him among the ranks of liberal-pluralist critics. Gramsci distinguished between “reactionary” and “progressive” totalitarianism with clear historical referents: the Italian fascist regime and the Soviet Union. The concept of “progressive totalitarianism,” which is certain to offend today’s delicate sensibilities, simply reflected Gramsci’s belief that the dictatorship of the proletariat, as established in the Soviet Union, was the necessary step in the transition toward a free and equal communist society. The real crux of Gramsci’s reflection was not a rejection of the Russian Revolution, but the question of the possible degeneration of the regime, its causes, and the proper kind of critical support that should be extended to it. Benvenuti and Pons well understand this crucial point. It is from this standpoint that they proceed to map out a series of pertinent notes from Gramsci, decoding them and explaining their significance with respect to the degeneration of the Soviet Union.

One of the most important notes in establishing Gramsci’s critique of the organizational aspects of Stalinism was written in April 1932. In it, Gramsci describes the phenomenon of “statolatry,” explaining how, “For certain social groups, which before their ascent to an autonomous state life have not had a long period of independent cultural and moral development of their own . . . a period of ‘statolatry’ is necessary and even opportune.” This vague and somewhat abstract formulation referred to the working class, which, unlike the bourgeoisie under feudalism, was unable to develop in
relative independence before capturing the state. More specifically, Gramsci here must have had in mind the Russian working class and its ongoing Soviet experience. The structure of Gramsci’s argument here follows closely his observations on the necessity of an economic-corporative phase discussed above. As in that case, while Gramsci allows for a “necessary” transitional phase, the point is not to posit a mechanical, apolitical succession of stages, so that the initial difficulties will fall away “necessarily.” Gramsci warns that this “‘statolatry’ cannot be abandoned to its fate, and especially must not become theoretical fanaticism and be understood as ‘perpetual.’ It must instead be criticized, precisely so that it can develop and produce new forms of state life in which individual and group initiative can be of a ‘state character’ without being determined by the ‘rule of functionaries.’” Gramsci here is taking measure of another aspect of the distinction between the growing pains and initial difficulties of the Soviet regime and the possibility of its permanent, disastrous degeneration. The key factor, here as in the case of the link between Marxist theory and practice, is the potential obstruction in the dialectic between the political leadership and the masses. Gramsci’s worries evoked a bureaucratization that threatened to suppress any and all energies and initiatives of the masses—an apt description of the organizational aspect of Stalinism. Benvenuti and Pons observe that this note establishes the premises for the “Gramscian pessimism” toward the development of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the note marks an important and definitive shift in the Notebooks, since Gramsci thereafter dropped any discussion of the withering away of the state. But this was not the congenital pessimism of the critical critic or perennial outsider. It was an explicit argument, if not an intervention, levied from a democratic standpoint against the systematic intolerance that threatened to crystallize into a regime of perpetual, state-supported repression.

Gramsci later echoed and fleshed out this critique in other notes that targeted more or less obliquely specific aspects of the bureaucratic and anti-democratic danger to the development of the Soviet Union. First, and least convincingly, Benvenuti and Pons point to one of the notes about the “New Prince,” that is, the problem of the Communist Party as the leading force in the struggle for a new society. Gramsci discusses the relation between such a party and the state in cases when the former is in power, considering if and how the function of “arbitration” played by the crown in constitutional monarchies—that is, the fact that it “rules” without being directly implicated in any governing administration or function—applies to it. He writes that while the specific formula of “arbitration” is not formally applicable in the case of the totalitarian party, the actual function will nonetheless be performed. “The
function itself is incorporated within the party, which will exalt the abstract concept of ‘State’ and will attempt by various means to create the impression that the function of impartial force is active and effective.”  

Benvenuti and Pons argue that this formulation, the idea of trying to “create an impression,” reveals Gramsci’s deep skepticism about the actually “effective” character of the fusion between party and state in the Soviet Union. Presented in these terms, the note lacks specificity, in a way that might encourage an interpretation of Gramsci’s critique as directed not against Stalinism, but against the Bolshevik regime, as a one-party state. However, Gramsci provides more specific contextual coordinates, which center the discussion once again on the collapse of the NEP equilibrium caused by the third period policies of Stalinism. In fact, Gramsci prefaces his conclusion with a reflection on the “balancing function” that political parties can play among “allied groups.”

This is another reference to the NEP-based regime that sustained the political alliance between the working class and the peasantry, the former being “hegemonic” to the degree that it made sacrifices and concessions to the latter. The point is not that the totalitarian party-state, by definition and as an abstract type, will attempt to create the false impression of a certain distance and independence between itself and the state, but that, in the context of the third period smashing of the NEP equilibrium, it has effectively undermined its capacity to function as “impartial force.” At the level of the party, this refers to how the suppression of its internal democracy dashed its capacity “feel,” to represent the allied groups. It is the loss of the party’s internal political dialectic already lamented by Gramsci in 1926. At the level of state policy, of course, the function of balancing and arbitration ceased abruptly as collectivization was enforced at gunpoint in the countryside.

The link between the third period policies and the organizational degeneration of the Communist Party under Stalin reappears in two other notes examined by Benvenuti and Pons. The first one discusses “police functions,” returning to the distinction between “progressive” and “reactionary” political parties, and extending it to the kind of legal order they produce once in power. Gramsci observes that the law will always manage to find its own criminals, be they “the reactionary social elements that that law has overthrown,” or “the progressive elements that the law restraints.” The key, then, is the class character of the law and of the regime that enforces it. This statement clearly reinforces the notion that for Gramsci political violence and repression is very much necessary in the struggle to create and sustain the foundation of a free and equal society. In other words, the fact that the Russian Revolution and the dictatorship of proletariat it established were in part based on force does not invalidate their progressive character.
But this statement seems somewhat platitudinous, if not tautological. Are the progressive party and its actions “progressive” by definition? Gramsci provides more specific criteria that are quite revealing. First, a progressive police function is that which “tends to maintain within the orbit of legality the reactionary forces that have been overthrown and to raise the backward masses to the level of the new legality.” This evoked once again the equilibrium first cultivated by the NEP and then simply demolished in the third period: the relation with the kulaks on one hand, and the patient “civilizational” and political work with the middle and poor sections of the peasantry on the other. Gramsci also explained that, “the party is progressive when it operates “democratically” (in the sense of democratic centralism) and the party is reactionary when it operated “bureaucratically” (in the sense of a bureaucratic centralism).” In both of these respects, third period Stalinism was not “progressive” according to Gramsci’s criteria and thus presumably constituted a degeneration into a politically barren totalitarian and repressive apparatus.

The second note was written very late, in June 1935, and arguably expresses an equally critical appraisal of the “progressive” prospects and capacity of the Stalinized party. Gramsci discusses again the political dialectic characteristic of a “modern-day party” that is able to develop as a “state” and as the expression of a definite, comprehensive political perspective. The revolutionary coming to power of such party and its rule, its “development into a state,” is not a unidirectional or automatic process. Instead, the process affects the party as well, presenting it with “new problems to solve,” and “demanding its continuous reorganization and development.” The problem of socialism, in other words, far from being settled by the conquest of power, remained an open political question and a challenge. Addressing it successfully required the sort of careful political leadership and “moderation” that for Gramsci was best exemplified by Lenin’s NEP. It required, in addition, the preservation of intraparty democracy, so that the party could continue to sense and represent the social forces existing in the Soviet Union. But as Gramsci reflected on “contemporary political life,” he found “abundant evidence” of very different attitudes and behavior. The successful development of the party-as-state was being “hampered by . . . blind and unilateral fanaticism of the ‘factional’ sort (of a . . . sect, a fraction of a broader party within which a struggle takes place).” The target of Gramsci’s critique is easily identified: the internecine factional struggles within the Russian party, the sectarianism of the third period and its consequences. By this time, his lamentation about the weakness and failures of the party-as-state must be
directed at the political responsibilities of the winning Stalinist faction, though Gramsci never says this explicitly.\textsuperscript{159}

The last and perhaps highest point of Gramsci’s critique of the organizational aspect of Stalinism, at least in a literary sense, is found a cluster of three notes, each presenting a vivid image meant to illustrate the destruction of intraparty democracy and its consequences. The first appears in the context of a critique of “organic centralism,” which Gramsci describes as the presumption of a perfect correspondence between the interests of the rulers and the ruled. The description of this concept very much evokes Gramsci’s assessment of the inadequacy and reactionary quality of bureaucratic centralism.\textsuperscript{160} Gramsci explains that while for the Catholic Church such a concept was “indispensable,” since any real and direct intervention from below would necessarily fracture its historical and organizational unity, other kinds of “collective organism” could not function merely by means of “passive and indirect consent.” Such “organism” required instead “active, direct participation” in order to survive, even if this resulted, as it must, in an “apparent state of disgregation and tumult.”\textsuperscript{161} The process of unification, “the formation of a collective consciousness” was only possible by means of a productive kind of “attrition” between those individuals that constituted the whole. Gramsci here is arguably returning to the recurring theme of the necessary political dialectic within the Communist Party, as well as its relation to the masses it had organized and mobilized. Gramsci warned that whenever “silence,” rather than “tumult,” characterized the general state of the party, this signaled not the successful aggregation and unification of its constitutive “multiplicity,” but the futile, counterproductive attempts to suppress it from above. In other words, the uniform political unity under Stalinism had to be artificial, a symptom of weakness, not of strength, and a sign that open and meaningful confrontation in and through the party was no longer possible. Gramsci’s reflection culminates with this brilliant vindication of the kind of party democracy Stalinism suppressed: “An orchestra doing a rehearsal, with each instrument playing on its own, creates the impression of a horrible cacophony; and yet such activity is the necessary condition for the orchestra to live as a unified ‘instrument.’”\textsuperscript{162}

Gramsci arrives at a similar conclusion in a different note when reflecting on the fate of politics “in those countries where there is a single, totalitarian party in power.” Such a party, according to Gramsci, can lose its political function and turn into a mere apparatus that applies “administratively” various kinds of techniques, such as techniques of propaganda or police control.\textsuperscript{163} This discussion, which is revealing in its failure to distinguish between “progressive” and “reactionary” totalitarianism, evokes once more the idea of
a troubling degeneration. From the heights of a productive (if difficult) work of political leadership, the Communist Party slouched toward bureaucratic routine and the rule of functionaries. The debasement of the party as the site where the political function is consciously exercised does not, however, altogether suppress politics. As in the case of Gramsci’s previous note, politics necessarily continues, though “indirectly,” flowing through a multiplicity of scattered “tendencies” that cannot be recognized and can hardly recognize themselves. With the legality of its political dialectic suppressed, the language of the party deteriorates, turning into formulaic “political jargon.” The party, moreover, becomes entangled in a futile, endless fight against shadows and apparitions. Gramsci captures the sad spectacle of this condition by describing it as recurring “polemics and struggle” against invisible enemies, “as in a game of blind man’s buff.”

The third, vivid expression of Gramsci’s judgment about the consequences of the Stalinist destruction of intraparty democracy and of a necessary political dialectic occurs in a note that deals with “black parliamentarism.” This referred to the existence of an “implicit,” unofficial, and extralegal forum for the political expression of various forces and tendencies in any society. In the case of liberal democracy, Gramsci explains that while there may be a “real” parliament, effective power still rests in a “black” one. This is simply a reminder of the Marxist premise that formal democracy does not invalidate the rule of capital. Gramsci then returns to the distinction between progressive and regressive totalitarianism, this time presented as “new” versus “old absolutism.” In the former, he argued, the existence of “black parliamentarism” constitutes historical progress, and returning to an “actual, traditional parliament” is out of the question. In other words, measured against liberal democracy as the main political form of capitalism, the black parliamentarism characteristic of the “new absolutism” (the continuing political exclusion of capitalistic forces in a dictatorship of the proletariat) constitutes a progressive development and democratic enhancement. This is yet another affirmation of the legitimacy and progressive character of the Russian Revolution.

Gramsci, however, moves on to consider the later development of “black parliamentarism” in the Soviet Union. In uncharacteristically direct fashion, Gramsci discusses the liquidation of the political opposition led by Trotsky as the elimination of the “black” parliament after the “legal” parliament had been disposed of by revolutionary means. Gramsci also evokes an “unstable equilibrium” of forces, and the subsequent “abolition of the legal terrain as the source of organization and reawakening of latent, ‘slumbering’ social forces,” which refers to the third period destruction of the difficult,
although necessary equilibrium sustained by the New Economic Policy. In
this context, Gramsci remarks that one cannot “abolish bad weather by abol-
ishing the barometer.”\textsuperscript{166} In other words, the abolition of black parliamen-
tarism in the Soviet Union, consisting of the liquidation of Trotsky’s Joint
Opposition and the destruction of the NEP equilibrium, was not an addi-
tional step in the harmonious advance toward socialism. Getting rid of the
barometer is not only an ineffective way to improve the weather, but can
only make one more vulnerable to its unpredictable changes.

My discussion of Gramsci’s critique of the doctrinal and organizational
aspects of Stalinism has also addressed many of the programmatic questions.
The reason for this is the central place occupied by the Stalinist third period
policies in Gramsci’s reflections on the development of the Soviet Union. In
order to appreciate this matter fully, however, there remains one outstanding
question: the presence of Trotsky in the \textit{Notebooks}. There, in contrast to
the period before his arrest, Gramsci’s assessment of Trotsky appears to be
uniformly negative.\textsuperscript{167} This is significant when we recall the fact that Trotsky
continued to be Stalin’s nemesis throughout the period when Gramsci was
writing, and that denouncing Trotsky was the precondition for any kind of
relations with the Soviet regime.\textsuperscript{168} Trotsky, as the most important, most
famous symbol of internal opposition to Stalin, represented enormous politi-
cal stakes and energies in concentrated form.\textsuperscript{169} Gramsci’s critique of Trotsky
in the \textit{Notebooks}, then, is crucial to an appraisal of his understanding of Stalin-
ism and can even be read as \textit{prima facie} evidence of his support for it.\textsuperscript{170}

The most important reference to Trotsky appears in one of the most
celebrates passages of the \textit{Notebooks}, in which Gramsci develops the idea of a
war of position. In this note, Trotsky is singled out as the paradigmatic figure
in the war of maneuver, which Gramsci negatively counterpoises to the war
of position. Trotsky is criticized as the “theorist of frontal assault in a period
when this can only result in defeat.”\textsuperscript{171} In another famous note, Gramsci
attacks Trotsky’s idea of permanent revolution as a residue of various errant
strands of thought, from French syndicalism to Rosa Luxemburg, and as an
expression of spontaneism. Here Gramsci draws an unflattering comparison
with Lenin, attacking Trotsky as a sort of flippant internationalist and ultra-
left adventurer, incapable of relating the general principles of Marxism to the
concrete terrain of each national experience and unable to grasp the subtle-
ties of the united front policy as the expression of Lenin’s attempt to shift to
a strategy appropriate to the war of position.\textsuperscript{172} Finally, Trotsky appears again
as the villain in another canonical passage in which Gramsci develops his
analysis of Fordism: “Trotsky’s tendency . . . would have eventually produced
a form of bonapartism, thus the inexorable necessity of smashing it.”\textsuperscript{173}
On the surface, these notes merely reproduce the standard account of Trotsky encouraged by Stalinism since 1924. Indeed in some ways Gramsci’s account seems to reproduce quite literally the attacks against Trotsky levied by Stalin and Bukharin in the mid 1920s. The question is whether it is sensible to take them at face value. Many of the PCI intellectuals, such as Paolo Spriano, have understandably showed little interest in probing this question more deeply. Even Perry Anderson, writing from a very different political standpoint, takes this treatment of Trotsky at face value, claiming that on this point Gramsci’s “confusion . . . was virtually total.” Other scholars have encouraged a somewhat displaced reading of these notes. Michele Pistillo, for example, argues that Gramsci here is not interested in taking sides with this or that figure in the Russian party, but is thinking through the problem of the revolution in the West. The dead weight of the contemporary academic uses of Gramsci, in addition, has caused a sort of passive displacement in the same direction, treating these notes as politically disembodied theory, removed from the Soviet experience and its uninteresting set of characters.

As I have already noted, this is not the kind of displacement encouraged by Benvenuti and Pons, who insist on the importance of the political context, and posit an even more radical and indeed Machiavellian displacement consciously adopted by Gramsci. In their account, Trotsky functions in the Notebooks as a lightning rod, a protective device designed by the author to defuse the danger of his fierce critique of the Stalinist third period. The elements of Benvenuti and Pons’s analysis I already presented—particularly the multifarious, critical reflections by Gramsci on the third period—provide a powerful encouragement to read Gramsci in this way. On the matter of these specific notes, Benvenuti and Pons rightly insist that Gramsci’s critique of Trotsky and permanent revolution is not an enthusiastic reassessment of the Stalinist liquidation of the opposition in the mid 1920s. Nor is it learned theorizing about the different political conditions in the West in a way that ignores or rejects the experience of the Russian Revolution, turning Gramsci into a reformed (and reformist) theorist of pluralism, “democratic” socialism, or identity politics.

Rather, Gramsci’s apparent attacks against Trotsky are part of a reflection concerning the construction of socialism in the USSR after Lenin. After the capture of power and the ensuing victory in the Civil War—outstanding “maneuvers” that for Gramsci were perfectly justified—Lenin correctly began to steer the country toward a war of position. The critical edge of Gramsci’s reflection is applied exactly against the dismaying and disastrous return to a pure “maneuverist” policy orientation: smashing the kulaks, collectivizing at
the point of a bayonet, and so on. This policy, in turn, was seen as creating the conditions both for a Bonapartist degeneration and for the demise of the Soviet Union as the propulsive factor in the international revolution. This was the real political content of Gramsci’s complaints against Trotsky, who was used as a sort of convenient shorthand for the ultraleftism imposed by Stalin in the third period.

The surface of Gramsci’s critique of Trotsky is misleading in another important respect. In a political sense, Trotsky had been instrumental in winning the international communist movement over to the perspective of the united front, which Gramsci considered paradigmatic of the “war of position.” Trotsky had fought alongside Lenin for the united front, and was the author of the most important political document that justified and codified this policy. Ironically, it was Trotsky who at the time had to relentlessly pressure and persuade Gramsci of the necessity of the united front at the first meeting of the Comintern’s enlarged executive. Even after the meeting, as a member of the Comintern’s Italian Commission, Trotsky had to continue some very difficult political discussions with Gramsci on this subject. It appears that only his masterful intervention at the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in late 1922 finally succeeded in tearing Gramsci away from Bordiga’s position against the united front. An ultraleft, adventurist version of Trotsky’s permanent revolution in this earlier period was indeed in circulation. This “theory of the offensive” advocated an unrelenting revolutionary frontal assault against the capitalist state, particularly in Germany, where this outlook was responsible for the disastrous “March action” of 1921. But, as I have already noted, it was Bukharin, not Trotsky, who propounded it. In the military sense, which is also an important aspect of Gramsci’s analysis, this characterization of Trotsky as an irresponsible ultraleft was even less justifiable. Trotsky had been directly involved in these questions as the organizer and leader of the Red Army during the Civil War. In that context, he had actually been the main opponent of the ultraleft and adventurist tendencies of those “simpletons of the offensive” in the military leadership who advocated a leap into “proletarian military science.” In that episode, Trotsky had to struggle against facile military, as well as political, generalizations from the maneuverist character of the Civil War.

The account of Trotsky as the theorist of frontal assault, war of maneuver, adventurist ultraleftism, and so on was therefore preposterous. Gramsci knew this first-hand, or at least knew the most important political aspect of this question. When Gramsci referred to the united front as the paradigmatic policy of the war of position, he was personally aware of Trotsky’s role. Gramsci’s explanation of the war of position, and of the different conditions in the
advanced capitalist countries, moreover, contains strong echoes of Trotsky’s report to the Fourth Comintern Congress, which Gramsci had personally attended. It would be thus less than plausible to take seriously Gramsci’s contrast of Lenin and Trotsky, and his identification of the disastrous war of maneuver with the latter. The real target of his critique must indeed have been third period Stalinism, the newest incarnation the maneuverist tendency.

In sum, there are good reasons to believe that the Notebook, and, in fact, some of its most celebrated and important passages, contain a critique of the programmatic aspect of Stalinism. Considered alongside the other elements of his critique, which address the doctrinal and organizational questions, Gramsci offers some useful elements to understand Stalinism. He accomplished this in spite of the difficult conditions imposed by the prison regime, his isolation from the movement, the limited material available, and the unpleasant and possibly corrosive necessity of having to filter his thought through a complex circuitry of displacement and deception. Gramsci’s critique, moreover, did not flow from a flippant rejection of the Russian Revolution, but engaged the complex question of its degeneration, highlighting some important causal and political elements.

Much like his opposition to Stalinism up to the time of his arrest, however, Gramsci’s analysis of this phenomenon remains in a sort of historical and political limbo. It is incomplete in the sense that it remains too connected to the peculiarities of the third period, which was only one of the programmatic manifestations of Stalinism. Gramsci can obviously not be faulted for this limit, since he did not get a real opportunity to consider even the developments of the mid-thirties. As a result, however, the analysis does miss the important eclectic, oscillating programmatic character of Stalinism. Gramsci’s analysis of the doctrinal and organizational aspects of Stalinism is also limited. The former is for the most part limited to Bukharin’s texts, and even on that ground, as I explained, it suffers from many ambiguities. The latter is more incisive, returning to the important 1926 theme of the necessary political dialectic between the party and the masses, and even beginning to consider the problem of bureaucratization. However, precisely as a continuation of Gramsci’s outlook in 1926, his analysis remains evasive, and in fact strives to maintain the appearances of agreement with Stalinism. In addition, we would look in vain to Gramsci’s Notebook for an analysis of other important aspects of Stalinism. Its historico-geographical specificity is inevitably not addressed, since Stalinism is never considered explicitly as a phenomenon with a proper name. For the same reason, the question of the political embodiment of Stalinism—that is, the possibility of identifying this phenomenon in a specific political faction that conquered the Bolshevik party
and the Soviet state—is also largely left to the imagination. Just as Gramsci’s tentative opposition to Stalinism in 1926 was suspended, leaving us to speculate about what could have been—what would have happened, for example, if Gramsci had been able to attend the political meeting with the Comintern representative in Valpolcevera—his analysis in the Notebooks becomes visible only through a complex play of mirrors and induces speculative questions: What if Gramsci had unrestricted access to material concerning the development of the Soviet Union? What if he had a clearer sense of the depths reached by Stalinist brutality with the purges and forced collectivization?

In conclusion, both Gramsci’s opposition to and analysis of Stalinism should be understood as emerging from the general standpoint of a defense of the Russian Revolution, striving to and indeed developing useful elements for a Marxist appraisal of its degeneration. However, they fail to congeal in any more specific way. Gramsci’s critique has its merits, as well as limits, but in any case it dares not speak its name. It was left to the contemporary academic users of Gramsci to piece together a dubious, unseemly “Gramscism.” And this project can be safely left to them. The critique of the contemporary uses of Gramsci remains valid and important from a number of standpoints: as a matter of historical accuracy; as a matter of decency in the face of preposterous and offensive appropriations; and as a way to encourage a widespread discussion on the specificity, possibilities, and limits of the mode of theorizing and of intellectual production characteristic of academia—a discussion for which Gramsci’s own profound reflections on the role of intellectuals must serve as a crucial reference. This is the reason why the call for a political turn in the academic uses of Gramsci demanded by Marxist scholars such as Anderson and Brennan remains a valid and pressing one—although, as I have tried to argue, it must be rearticulated from a more solid foundation that takes seriously the problem of Stalinism. From a political standpoint, however, there is no basis for a Gramscian turn. I have argued that in the shadow of Stalinism, the revitalization of Marxism will require a specific set of historical coordinates—a Marxist tradition offering a cogent analysis of Stalinism and unrelenting political opposition it. Even after being rescued from contemporary misappropriations, Gramsci’s political and theoretical legacy does not provide this. We must, therefore, look elsewhere.
Part II
The Fortune-Teller and the High-Wire Act
Leon Trotsky, Stalinism, and Political Theory
As the high point of his 1982 grand tour of Western Europe, Ronald Reagan had the pleasure of delivering this startling piece of news to the members of British Parliament: Communism is finished. This pronouncement was bold and unexpected because it challenged a deeply entrenched common sense about the Soviet Union. In spite of all the anguish, lamentations, and vitriol expended to denounce the perverted nature of the Soviet regime, few doubted that the system was as solid as it was monolithic and as unyielding as it was dangerous. By 1991, even after the fall of the Berlin Wall and after years of Mikhail Gorbachev’s gestures and promises, the rapidity and relative ease of the collapse of the Soviet giant was astounding. The secret services of all the major Western countries, as well as Israel’s, were completely caught by surprise. The accumulated wisdom of generations of well-remunerated Sovietologists proved unable to conceive of, let alone foresee, such a dramatic endgame. The assumptions and protocols of the discipline of international relations were similarly exposed by this sudden and unexpected event. This generalized failure was the product of a well-entrenched collective mindset that is perhaps best captured by Samuel Huntington’s lavish praise, expressed perhaps with a dash of envy, for the Soviet Union’s capacity to repress dissent and contain ethnic, social, and cultural centrifugal forces. While most people were prepared and persuaded to think of the Soviet “empire” as evil, to think of it as finished in 1982 or even on the eve of its collapse was an entirely different matter. And so, in retrospect, one could regard Reagan’s voice as a prophetic one, crying in the wilderness, but for the ICBMs, armored divisions, and occasional paramilitary death squad ready to heed its call.

In the 1930s, Leon Trotsky, who by then had been stripped of the more modest means available to the commander of the Red Army, issued his own
foreboding prophecies about the future of the Soviet Union. He did so at a
time and in a context that is now very difficult to recapture. The capitalist
world was still engulfed in the terrible social and economic problems that
arose from one of its deepest crises. The Soviet Union, according to many
accounts, had avoided most of the damage inflicted by the otherwise world-
wide economic depression, industrialized its economy, consolidated its posi-
tion as a great power, and still appeared to many to be on its way to that final
synthesis between freedom and equality called communism. Many moderate
and respectable figures in the West continued to support the Soviet Union
and Stalin in particular, even as news of some troubling internal develop-
ments began to come out.6

The famous English writer H. G. Wells, for example, was positively
smitten by Stalin’s character: “Never met a man more candid, fair and hon-
est. No one is afraid of him and everybody trusts him.”7 Walter Duranty,
reporting for the New York Times, denied the existence of massive purges,
famines, and forced internal displacements, expressing genuine confidence in
Stalin’s capacity to create a new and just society.8 The Fabian socialists Beat-
rice and Sidney Webb, who had originally denounced the Bolshevik Revo-
lution, were praising the Soviet Union by the 1930s as a democratic society
in which people enjoyed complete freedom of criticism.9 Support for the
show trials, the visible surface of the Stalinist terror that raged between 1936
and 1939, came from every nook and cranny of Western civil and political
society. The German novelist Leon Feuchtwanger and the new United States
ambassador to the Soviet Union, Joseph E. Davies, attended the trials and
expressed a heartfelt belief in their truthfulness and legitimacy.10 Remark-
able American artists such as Upton Sinclair, Richard Wright, Paul Robeson,
and Dashiell Hammett expressed similar sentiments from a safer distance.11
A Jewish newspaper based in New York hailed the Soviet Union as “our
only consolation” and rebuffed Trotsky’s observations about the role of anti-
Semitism in the trials.12 Eighty-eight famous and not-so-famous American
intellectuals publicly mobilized against Trotsky when he dared to propose
a commission of inquiry to independently verify the mounting accusations
raised in the show trials. The number grew to about 150 a year later, when
a public statement was issued defending the verdicts issued at the trial not
simply on their judicial merit, but as crucial to the cause of progress in the
United States as well.13 Some of the most important voices of American lib-
eralism, such as the New Republic and The Nation, vigorously denounced
Trotsky and supported the trials.14 The progressive intellectuals of the French
League of Human Rights also rallied to defend the honor and propriety of
Stalin’s judicial proceedings.15 This sort of climate continued during World
War II when, for example, Hollywood began to produce flattering depictions of the mighty ally.16

Although this is now difficult to imagine, a politically, culturally, and ethnically wide-ranging outpouring of sympathy and confidence was directed toward the Soviet Union during and after the most appalling events that swept its social landscape.17 A few intellectuals even began to develop the idea that, leaving aside the normative merits of the system, the Soviet Union was not only a stable regime, but actually constituted the prototype of a “bureaucratic collectivism” that was destined to become the next stage in the political evolution of humankind.18 In the eyes of most of those who either ferociously opposed or advocated them, the Soviet Union appeared more and more as the living and enduring incarnation of abstractions such as “communism,” “Marxism,” “proletariat,” and “revolution.” This is the picture that would become even more entrenched once framed in the simple dichotomies of the cold war era. We could then say that Trotsky’s voice, raised against the consolidation of this common sense, is also endowed with a certain prophetic quality.

Indeed, Trotsky has often been described and judged in these terms. Isaac Deutscher’s brilliant and largely sympathetic biography presents Trotsky as a prophet—“armed,” “unarmed,” and finally “outcast.”19 An important and fierce critic, Leszek Kolakowski, has also encouraged us to look at Trotsky in this way, though in a very different spirit. Kolakowski, an ex-communist intellectual who defected from the Eastern Bloc to professionally produce denunciations of Marxism of encyclopedic scope,20 portrayed Trotsky as a prophet, though a minor and very poor one indeed: “Trotsky’s literary and political activity . . . is a mixture of unfulfilled prophecies, fantastic illusions, false diagnoses, and unfounded hopes.” Kolakowski added, with a morbid touch, that perhaps Stalin should have inflicted on Trotsky an even more severe punishment than death, “by letting him live to see the collapse of all his hopes and prophecies, not a single one of which came true.”21 Rather than a prophet, a figure that in spite of failures and weaknesses retains a certain grandeur, Trotsky, in the hands of Kolakowski, is reduced to a pathetic and inept fortune-teller.

On this purely astrological plane, Kolakowski’s statement is easily refuted. In the 1920s, Trotsky predicted not only the American rise to dominance as the strongest capitalist country, but also the fact that precisely because of this the United States would be compelled to fight against revolutionary upheavals on a global scale, such the ones that would actually take place in Southeast Asia, South and Central America, Africa, and the Middle East.22 In 1927, only days before Chiang Kai-Shek’s epoch-making massacre
of Chinese workers in Shanghai, Trotsky warned that the Stalinist-enforced policy of continued political subordination of the Chinese working class to the Kuomintang would have disastrous consequences.\(^\text{23}\) In 1928, on the eve of the Great Depression, he presciently wrote that “the inevitability of a crisis is entirely without doubt; nor, considering the present world scope of American capitalism, do we think that it is out of the question that the very next crisis will attain extremely great depth and sharpness. But there is no justification whatsoever for the attempt to conclude from this that the hegemony of North America will be restricted or weakened.”\(^\text{24}\)

Furthermore, in 1932, against the Comintern’s senseless dismissal of the Nazi threat, Trotsky warned the German workers that, “If fascism comes to power it will ride like a terrific tank over your skulls and spines.”\(^\text{25}\) In 1933, soon after the rise of Hitler to power, he predicted that “The date of the new European catastrophe will be determined by the time necessary for the arming of Germany. It is not a question of months, but neither is it a question of decades. It will be but a few years before Europe is again plunged into a war.”\(^\text{26}\) In 1936, confronted with the Norwegian government’s attempt to silence his public responses to the Moscow trials, Trotsky thundered against Trygve Lie, Norway’s Social Democrat Minister of Justice: “This is your first act of surrender to Nazism in your own country. You will pay for this. You think yourself secure and free to deal with a political exile as you please. But the day is near—remember this!—the day is near when the Nazis will drive you from your country, all of you.” Lie shrugged at the time, but would remember this moment later, as he and his colleagues scrambled to flee the country before the arrival of the Nazi troops.\(^\text{27}\)

Trotsky’s prescience did not end there. Again in 1936, chastising Stalin’s comments about the League of Nations as an instrument of peace, Trotsky wrote that this institution remained a bourgeois delusion that could do nothing to prevent the outbreak of a second world war.\(^\text{28}\) Concerning the coming war, he also predicted that “Hitler has far less chances than Wilhelm II of carrying out a war to victory,” and that Japan would be crushed: “A war will bring the empire of Mikaido the greatest of social catastrophes.”\(^\text{29}\) Trotsky also warned about the kind of consequences that the impending war would have for Europe’s Jewish population: “It is possible to imagine without difficulty what awaits the Jews at the mere outbreak of the future world war . . . the next development of world reaction signifies with certainty the physical extermination of the Jews.”\(^\text{30}\) A few days after the outbreak of World War II, Trotsky predicted that, “should Hitler, with the aid of Stalin, come out victorious on the western front, he would on the morrow turn his guns against the USSR.”\(^\text{31}\)
With respect to the Soviet Union and its fate, which is what will concern us most directly here, Trotsky was able to predict its birth, decay, and demise in remarkable fashion. In 1905–6, Trotsky predicted that the working class could and would come to power in backward Russia by means of a successful revolutionary process that would rapidly merge democratic and socialist tasks. Beginning from the early 1920s, he warned that the Soviet regime, in the absence of a revolutionary breakthrough elsewhere in Europe, could degenerate in a bureaucratic direction. In the light of the most acute manifestations of this degeneration in the 1930s, Trotsky predicted that, in the absence of a political revolution, the Stalinist bureaucracy would eventually bury the legacy of the October Revolution once and for all and undertake the restoration of capitalism in Russia. More specifically, part of this third prediction was the warning that "a backslide to capitalism is wholly possible" and that even if the Soviet Union were to survive World War II, "No military victory can save the inheritance of the October revolution, if imperialism holds out in the rest of the world." Trotsky was also able to sketch out the cascading logic of the "reforms" of the Gorbachev era: "It has happened more than once that a bureaucratic dictatorship seeking salvation in 'liberal' reforms has only weakened itself," as well as a rough outline of the process of capitalist restoration in Russia, with the rise of a new propertied class from the ranks of the old bureaucracy and a tumultuous free-for-all involving foreign interests as well: "The planning principle would be converted for the transitional period into a series of compromises between state power and individual 'corporations'—potential proprietors... among the Soviet captains of industry... and foreign capitalists." Trotsky also noted that this process would result in dire consequences for the Soviet people, expecting "a catastrophic decline of the economy and culture."

Although not all of what he expected has come to pass, Trotsky displayed remarkable gifts of clairvoyance. But of course this sort of assessment cannot take us very far. Trotsky was not interested in divination and neither should we be. Trotsky was instead interested, from very early on in his life up until his death, in a consuming and compulsive manner, in politics. Already arrested, jailed, and exiled for revolutionary activities in his teens, elected president of the Petrograd Soviet during the two flashpoints of revolutionary turmoil in 1905 and 1917, in charge of diplomatic negotiations to end the war with Germany, organizer and commander of the Red Army during the Russian Civil War, founder and leading figure of the Third and Fourth International, Trotsky was unquestionably a man of action. But this compulsion and feverish activities produced not a stunted and monomaniacal narrowness, but a tremendous broadness of outlook. Precisely as a
result of his political activities across many continents and in many different capacities, he was compelled to think about foreign policy as well as the artistic merits of Italian Futurism, about military strategy as well as the historical origins of Freemasonry, about electrification as well as Freudian psychoanalysis. Trotsky, in other words, was not an impulsive, intellectually deprived political activist. He had to think systematically and deeply about his actions, those of his allies and enemies, and about various social and political forces in the most disparate contexts. He engaged, that is to say, not just in politics but in political theory.

This statement may be puzzling, for Trotsky’s name is not typically associated with political theory—either as a specialized branch of political science or as a vocation and aspiration in broader academic circles. It is certainly the case that Trotsky’s political theory is not easily assimilated into contemporary academia. In this crowded field of alternatives, it easily stands out. It is not, to be sure, the “formal” or “game” theory that now circulates in political science departments by way of economics. Trotsky was not in the business of constructing mathematical models of behavior based on preordained, lifeless interests. Neither is it political theory understood as the interpretation of texts and the history of ideas. Trotsky believed Marxism to be “a method of analysis—not . . . of texts, but . . . of social relations.”

He thought it a measure of the theoretical degeneration of party life, for example, when its internal debates and struggles took the form of endless and debasing “rummaging among . . . old quotations.”

Looking at broader academic currents, Trotsky’s theory now falls between the two stools occupied by the aspiring scientists and the aspiring poets. It is not the kind of “social theory” that strives to emulate the rigors of science with its falsifiable propositions and independent variables. Trotsky did describe, explain, and predict, but in an unabashedly political sense: to depict as accurately as possible the existing social landscape, to engage with the living forces that populate it, and to consciously and collectively reshape it. Thus, the more respectably secular “prediction” is in this sense not an adequate replacement for “prophecy.” Trotsky’s predictions were politically open-ended. The restoration of capitalism and the collapse of the Soviet Union were deemed probable, but only in the unfortunate case that the political struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy would come to naught. Trotsky’s theory is not, finally, the kind that dominates those sizable sectors of academia that today are ill-disposed toward science. In these quarters, “theory” habitually evokes that most elusive and vaporous presence called postmodernism. Moved by an ethics of pullulating difference, infused with unfulfilled artistic aspirations, this kind of theory is, in the
end, contemplative, politically inert, and often unreadable. Trotsky, who also wrote incisive literary criticism, would have taken it to task on aesthetic as well as political grounds.

Trotsky’s political theory is therefore of a characteristically Marxist sort: consciously and positively paired to political practice, and as such necessarily restless and uncomfortable in an academic setting. But this is only a first and very rough approximation, for more needs to be said about both the possibilities and limits of political theory in academia, as well as about the complexities of the Marxist unity of theory and practice. For now, I wish to note that in spite of the somewhat forbidding peculiarities of Trotsky’s brand of political theory, and even in spite of the deluge of slanders and mystifications from both sides of the cold war that continue to dim the significance of his legacy, the fact that Trotsky continues to stand outside of what is recognized and recognizable as political theory is a remarkable and unfortunate fact. More than that, the colossal magnitude of Trotsky as a historical figure, and the breadth and depth of his writings, conspire to turn this fact into something of a mystery.

One would expect the dramatic qualities of Trotsky’s life to naturally attract curiosity and serious attention from even moderately curious and serious men—from his politically precocious youth, when we find him leading strikes, demonstrations, and the first soviet, escaping twice from Siberian exile, and issuing a dramatic defense of revolution from the prisoners’ dock; to his dizzying rise to power and works of statesmanship and military leadership; to the tragedy of his later years, when, continuing to fight with the same energy, he would suffer tremendous political and personal blows in an unequal fight against both capitalism and Stalinism. That a man constantly consumed by international political activities and commitments could pen a masterly history of the revolution he led in the first place, that he could develop a seminal and timely analysis of the rise of German fascism while exiled in a far-off island at the edge of Europe, that he could be the first to identify Stalinism as a totalitarian phenomenon of pressing political and theoretical interest and offer a cogent analysis of it might strain the imagination. But not as much as the fact that this same man continues to be ignored by those whose profession it is, at a minimum, to chronicle the history of political thought.

One is tempted to solve this mystery by advancing an impertinent hypothesis: Trotsky is too imposing a figure to fit the standard template of political theory. Our imagination is accustomed to far less. No one would deny that Plato thought great thoughts, but he did so largely as a disaffected outsider in the shadow of Athens’ political grandeur. Hobbes’s writings
undoubtedly had a political impact, but in spite, not because of, the instincts and inclinations of that notoriously timorous man, whose many flights into political exile were of a strictly voluntary character. Rousseau may well have paved the way for the French Revolution in the intellectual realm, but he but did not live to see it or fight for it, let alone lead it. The best that can be said about the political record of Nietzsche, the mercurial thinker, was that he was too ill to fight for Prussian militarism and that he displayed a staunch, if costly, opposition to the mistreatment of horses.

While these canonical figures do not measure up to Trotsky, it still can be said that most of them lived tumultuous lives, free from the comforts and trappings of professionalization. The same cannot be said of Michel Foucault, John Rawls, and many other idols of early twenty-first century political theory. This more recent cast of characters may be strikingly diverse in style—from bohemian dandies to grey eminences—but, in the great scheme of things, it consists of small and rather tame academic creatures. They gnaw away at history with learned and persistent criticism without the slightest chance of making history themselves. Compared to these figures in particular, it could be said that Trotsky is big, and that it is political theory that got small.

Political theory, however, at least as a more general, cross-disciplinary field, has undoubtedly found a way to accommodate two figures of a magnitude and political persuasion comparable to Trotsky. Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci are widely regarded, after all, as legitimate political theorists. In both cases, however, this is true in spite, not because of, their history-making political activities. Marx is most often praised either as an insightful social scientist or as an incisive critical critic rather than a revolutionary theorist and fighter. On the side of social science, to mention one prominent example, Seymour Martin Lipset explicitly hailed the development of “apolitical Marxism.” Members of the once influential school of “analytical Marxism” worked to demonstrate that Marx’s arguments, when properly filtered, are compatible with the protocols and standards of contemporary social science and analytical philosophy. The economist Meghnad Desai explained how Marx, a competent and insightful student of capitalism, was impudently disturbed in his studies by the clueless and bloodthirsty Marxists, and how the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 was his final revenge against them. Anthony Giddens has expressed this general tendency most clearly when he managed to write that “Marx was certainly a revolutionary, but he was relatively uninterested in revolution itself; the actual revolutionary process was in his eyes truly the point of transition confirming basic changes that had already occurred in society.”

In a different vein, but to the same effect, others understand Marx as an agreeable and important “critical” theorist, so long as his thought and legacy can
be detached from the history of the Marxist movement. The latter is regarded as a criminal or, worse, vulgar enterprise that dimmed for too long the legitimate brilliance of the former. Jacques Derrida, for example, has sought to distinguish a pristine, wholesome “spirit” of Marx from its disastrous political incarnations and expressed some sort of affiliation with the former exactly as the latter finally collapsed.\footnote{This is also the attitude of Terrell Carver who, similarly inspired by the end of the cold war, declared that “Marx is no longer of necessity the theorist of proletarian revolution, inevitably burdened with the ideas and needs of those who came after. Rather he can now come into his own as the premier critical theorist of commercial society.”}\footnote{Marx is thus quite welcome into the respectable ranks and august halls of political theory, so long as he would kindly remember to check his Marxism at the door.\footnote{A very similar story can be told about Gramsci as well.}}

Marx and Gramsci are thus still read widely, and are even known to induce a certain awe. But this is a controlled reaction. Like dinosaur bones assembled in a museum in a somewhat menacing pose, they remain, in the end, as inert as they are compelling. Trotsky, on the other hand, has proven immune to this treatment. Rather than be assimilated in this way, he has largely been ignored. Unlike Marx and Gramsci, whose political deeds are more easily subsumed to their great and not-so-great texts, Trotsky made a revolution. He did not just search, think, and struggle. He won, at least for a precious while. Little in Trotsky’s textual legacy runs the risk of being confused with the sort of work that satisfies the professional protocols of the academic disciplines. Unlike Marx and Gramsci, there is little in Trotsky resembling a philosophy of history, a political economy, a social theory, or even a statement of method. Most of his texts address instead a specific conjuncture, surveying a political landscape, laying out the prospects and strategic lines for action. For this reason, the specific subject of his analysis could today be safely dismissed as historical, or even journalistic—the 1926 general strike in England, the Spanish Civil War, the Popular Front government in France, all discussed in vivid detail. But it is exactly Trotsky’s relentless attention to \textit{all} the pressing political developments of his time, and his unabashed search for a line of action leading to and through them, whether from prison, from the height of state power, from exile, or from the confines of a small and embattled movement, that are conspicuous and unsettling. Trotsky was not like the imprisoned Gramsci, forced by necessity to be evasive and indirect; struggling, but inexorably slouching toward the relative peace and comfort of a defeated \textit{fur ewig}. He was not quite like Marx either, for if the need for a political opening did chase Marx’s attention over the whole surface of the globe—Germany, France, England, India, North America, Russia—this...
simply was not to occur during in his time. It is Trotsky’s omnipresence and
dogged concreteness, in the thick of things and at all decisive moments, that
appears, to the complacent and thoroughly professionalized, as strange, sus-
piciously alive, and best left alone. From the ice-pick to the shrug, Victor
Serge’s refrain that “[m]en like Trotsky suggest much too uncomfortably the
human possibilities of the future to be allowed to survive in a time of sloth
and reaction,” tragically true for his time, remains so for ours, though more
in the farcical vein.

I. SILENCE AND WORSE: THE UNCONSCIOUS USES AND
CONSCIOUS ABUSES OF TROTSKY

Whatever the reasons for it, the scholarly silence around Trotsky is difficult
to document. One way to register it is to briefly consider the curious fate of
one of Trotsky’s most original and important theoretical concepts: uneven and
combined development. Trotsky formulated the concept in the context of the
failed 1905 revolution in Russia. His was a daring departure from the basic
assumptions of classical Marxism, as understood in Russia, and more gener-
ally of social theory, such as it existed at the time. Beginning from an analysis
of the concrete conditions affecting Russia given its location in the world cap-
talist economy, the concept of uneven and combined development encompassed
the geographic relations, social content, and ultimately the political
consequences of capitalist development.

Trotsky rejected the expectation that capitalism would arise in peripheral
countries more or less the same way as it had done in the West: through the
political agency of a national bourgeoisie and the unfolding of familiar stages,
ultimately leading to the collapse of the old order by means of a bourgeois-
democratic revolution. He began instead from the idea that capitalism ought
to be considered not as a pattern of transformation that would recur in each
separate country, but as a systemic totality—a world economy connecting and
encompassing more and less developed political sub-units. Understood in this
way, capitalist expansion impressed an accelerated but lopsided development
onto the socioeconomic structure at the periphery of the world economy.
Rather than produce “a world after its own image,” Western capitalism would
instead systematically spawn odd mutations. These mutations combined, on
the one hand, some of capitalism’s most advanced socioeconomic features in
concentrated form: state-of-the-art industrial techniques, urbanization, and
the rapid rise and maturation of a modern working class concentrated in
gigantic industrial enterprises. On the other hand, capitalism at the periphery
would preserve and in fact strengthen existing archaic and grotesque forms of
political rule. It would produce only a dependent and weak native bourgeoisie chained both to foreign financial capital and to local landlordism, and leave intact vast stretches of rural and traditional backwardness.

These characteristics, all empirically present in Russia in the early 1900s, were thus not temporary distortions, but permanent features. Consequently, the widespread expectations for a bourgeois-democratic revolution led by the Russian bourgeoisie were to remain unfulfilled. A new political perspective (known as “permanent revolution”) was required, pivoting on the relatively new, relatively small, but potentially powerful working class. Rather than patiently wait for the advent of the bourgeois republic, or at most perform auxiliary political services, the working class at the periphery would be compelled to take political initiative and accomplish an extraordinary feat. It would, first, be the main active force leading the fight for democratic and national tasks. But in doing so, it would be compelled by the logic of the political situation—in particular by the parasitic role and conservative outlook of the bourgeoisie and its inability and unwillingness to break with tsarism—to rapidly engage in a struggle for socialism as well.

Even leaving aside its enormous political implications—this analysis did not merely “predict” the events of 1917, but in fact, to the extent that it came to reflect the Bolsheviks’ political outlook beginning from Lenin’s “Letters from Afar” and “April Theses,” actually enabled them—Trotsky’s uneven and combined development was a remarkable theoretical achievement. With its “merging” and “growing over” of what had hitherto been conceived as temporally discrete processes, it overcame the rigidities and formalism of a stageist understanding of history. With its refusal to index revolutionary action to the ripeness of the development of the forces of production, it jolted the placid and mechanical causality of economic determinism. With its sudden reversal of geographical emphasis, it decisively transferred history-making agency into the hands of a peripheral subaltern, outflanking the increasingly complicit Eurocentrism of the Second International. All this, accomplished by Trotsky in his mid-twenties, demonstrated a rare personal capacity and inclination to resist a prevailing, epochal mood of scholasticism and passivity in order to put to use and develop Marxist theory, rather than merely recite it. And this was not a matter confined to the Marxist tradition—for if Trotsky was able to borrow, develop, and rearrange in original combination elements from its Russian strands, Menshevism and Bolshevism, his insight also cut across wider and more deeply rooted cleavages, such as those dividing Narodniki and Marxists, Slavophiles and Westernizers.

Trotsky’s achievement, moreover, is not confined to the particular historical circumstances of early twentieth-century Russia, however...
important this might have turned out to be, but retains a general con-
temporary significance. It is difficult to think of some of the most recent
developments in India and China, for example, without resorting to ele-
ments of the conceptual template developed by Trotsky. Even conven-
tional bourgeois commentators of the Thomas Friedman–type manage
to do so, when, in describing the spectacle of capitalist globalization in
faraway lands, they remark on the dizzying contrast between Bangalore’s
IT marvels and the wretched poverty of the Indian countryside, between
the rise of India as a nuclear power and the thriving presence of its legion
astrologists and matchmakers, or between the extraordinary industrial
development of Guangdong province and the Communist Party’s of Chi-
na’s Byzantine rituals and sclerotic inefficiency.

More importantly, from a general theoretical standpoint, Trotsky’s
“uneven and combined development” anticipated a number of later devel-
opments around and outside of Marxism and in many disciplinary areas.
This list would include Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-system theory, par-
ticularly its insistence on world capitalism as the single unit of analysis
and systemic whole, rather than the mere sum of national parts. It would
include many elements of the analysis of the capitalist periphery put forth
by Latin American dependency theorists—for example, permanent and
willful underdevelopment, the impossibility of inducing a sociological dif-
ferentiation comparable to the West, and the enduring political and eco-
nomic significance of “old” classes and political regimes. It would include
Alexander Gerschenkron’s developmental economics and Thorstein Veblen’s
social theory, whose insistence on the peculiar advantages of backwardness
and belated industrial development mirror Trotsky’s ideas.63 In the same
vein, it would also include aspects of the more recent literature on space-
time compression and the economic and political effects of the acceleration
of capitalist development.64 It would include, at the level of a conceptu-
alization, if not philosophy of history, Louis Althusser’s “different histori-
cal temporalities,”65 and perhaps even Jacques Derrida’s “contretemps”66
It would certainly include efforts in the direction of a “spatialization of
Marxism” by geographers like David Harvey and Neil Smith.67

Like many of Trotsky’s contributions, however, uneven and combined
development did not quite survive its encounter with Stalinism. Co-opted,
gutted of any critical content, it finally sunk in the bottomless pit Stalin-
ism dug at the center of Marxist theory.68 As a result, almost none of these
academic descendants acknowledge a debt to or an affiliation with Trotsky’s
concept and fail to demonstrate even a vague awareness of its existence. Con-
sider, for example, the following passage:
The upshot is that the development of the space economy of capitalism is beset by counterpoised and contradictory tendencies. On the one hand spatial barriers and regional distinctions must be broken down. Yet the means to achieve that end entail the production of new geographical differentiations which form new spatial barriers to overcome . . . This is what is meant by the concept of the inevitable uneven development of capitalism.69

Harvey writes this derivative passage in the last chapter of a book that fails to cite Trotsky even once. The point here is not that Trotsky already said everything there is to say about uneven and combined development. Harvey’s work, for example, skillfully pursues numerous lines of inquiry and no doubt represents a genuine, and in many respects original, contribution to Marxist political economy. Nonetheless, his failure to even gesture toward Trotsky’s seminal insight and specific early articulation of “uneven development” is a useful measure of the sort of academic silence around Trotsky that I am attempting to describe here.70

The point, then, is to recover a sense of Trotsky’s original and important theoretical contribution in the face of its peculiar erasure. Uneven and combined development is useful in this respect because, lost in the shipwreck of the international communist movement, it tends to reappear time and again on the shores of academic writing as a strange object of uncertain origin. But a similar account could be sketched on the question of fascism, based on the originality and prescience of Trotsky’s analysis of it, the disappearance of Trotsky’s analysis in the miasma of the “orthodox” Marxism enforced by Stalinism, and the resurfacing of its elements in scholarly analyses. It could also be sketched, of course, in the case of Stalinism itself, as a historical and political phenomenon to be analyzed.

At one level, therefore, the silence surrounding Trotsky’s theoretical contributions depends on their unconscious uses. Trotsky is present, but in ghostly fashion, unobserved and unacknowledged for the most part. But there is another source for this silence, to be found in the rare but recurring active dismissals that enable and justify it. In these cases Trotsky is obviously acknowledged, but is not exactly present. What is criticized is a mere caricature of Trotsky whose arguments are dogmatic, doctrinaire, ultra-determinist, or simply incoherent, and “explained” as the predictable product of an unfortunate psychological state or as vacuous rhetorical play. This sort of literature suffers not only from a superficial approach to Trotsky’s legacy, but also from that peculiar condition perceptively diagnosed by Alasdair MacIntyre: “One dare not approach greatness of a certain dimension . . .
without a sense of one’s own limitations. A Lilliputian who sets out to write Gulliver’s biography had best take care. Above all he dare not be patronizing.” While MacIntyre was warning specifically those who wanted to write about Lenin, his assessment is actually more suitable to Trotsky’s case, for if the magnitude of the subject is surely similar, the respective academic critics differ in one important way. Criticism of Lenin is a veritable cottage-industry, whereas, as discussed earlier, those writing to actively dismiss Trotsky are relatively few. In the former case, MacIntyre thus oddly underestimates the one, well-known advantage of the Lilliputians, while it is in the latter that he could have more appropriately pointed out that an agitated handful of them makes for a rather silly spectacle.

A brief illustration of this literature will suffice here. First, we will briefly return to Kolakowski and his *Main Currents of Marxism*, which includes a chapter on Trotsky. Kolakowski’s judgment is lapidary: Trotsky “did not concern himself with philosophical questions . . . nor did he attempt any theoretical analysis of the foundations of Marxism . . . with his dogmatic cast of mind (he) did not contribute to the theoretical elucidation of any point of Marxist doctrine.” The thirty-five pages on Trotsky surrounding this judgment add plenty of vitriol, but little argumentation and specificity. The dead weight of Kolakowski’s credentials—the high-brow dissidence, the deeply felt career-related injuries suffered at the hands of the regime, the plodding philosophizing in many other texts—appears to do most of the work. Nonetheless, on the question of Trotsky’s understanding of Stalinism it is possible to discern two specific arguments advanced by Kolakowski. First, he asserts that Trotsky failed to detect any social foundation to Stalinism within the Soviet Union, and thus his analysis of it failed as “Marxism” before failing in all other respects. Second, Kolakowski writes that Trotsky explained Stalinism in terms of the failure of revolution abroad, but, at the same time, that Trotsky also explained the latter by means of the former, and, adding to the logical incongruity, continued to maintain that Stalinism, by means of military invasions, could serve as the instrument of legitimate revolutionary change outside the Soviet Union.

While Trotsky’s understanding of Stalinism and the Soviet Union will be discussed fully in the next chapter, I will provide here a basic sense of the shoddiness of Kolakowski’s first argument. The strength of Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinism rests precisely in its (Marxist) inclination to understand and explain its social foundation and causes, coupled with its (Marxist) awareness that this social foundation, though important, only constitutes the more or less favorable terrain of struggle on which political battles among living forces can be won or lost. Stalinism, in other words, was neither an arbitrary
political accident, hovering above and independent from the prevailing social conditions, nor the natural, inevitable product of these social conditions. But this is already too sophisticated a framework, for refuting Kolakowski on this point merely requires showing that Trotsky understood Stalinism as resting on a specific social foundation. Schematically, this consisted of the historical inheritance of Russia’s backwardness, its material scarcity and underdevelopment, the physical depletion and political exhaustion of the Russian working class, and, more broadly, the failure of the revolutionary movements in Europe, which manifested itself as a social factor in the sense that the Soviet Union was economically isolated and disengaged from the world economy. Even a cursory reading of Trotsky’s essential texts would net a deluge of illustrations and elucidations of the social foundation of Stalinism.

Kolakowski’s critique is notable not only for its fragility, but also because it relies on a tendency that is typical of the kind of dismissive literature being reviewed here. This is the tendency to reduce Trotsky’s positions to the negligible byproduct of a somewhat more interesting (perhaps in a clinical sense) mental state: the unwillingness to acknowledge his complicity in the building of a monstrous Soviet regime, his desperate and futile attempt to show that if only he had been the one in power instead of Stalin things would have been different, and a general disorientation inflicted by his political defeat and isolation. This is offered as the readily available key to understand all the debates or controversies in which Trotsky was involved, from the political and class nature of the Soviet state to the question of fascism. In this respect, Kolakowski represents a specific genre of psychological “interpretation” and dismissal of Trotsky.

Dmitri Volkogonov’s biography of Trotsky represents a variation on this psychological theme. While Kolakowski’s intervention is the dishonest product of a cold war context and sensibility, Volkogonov’s book belongs to a very different epoch, in spite of the fact that it was written during the late Gorbachev era and printed as the Soviet Union began to crumble. This accounts for the different style between the two. Kolakowski writes with the pugnacious tone of the hardened cold warrior who knows what is at stake, while Volkogonov prefers the self-evident platitudes befitting that brief period when, in the twilight of the Soviet Union, history itself was thought to be coming to a close. This feature of Volkogonov’s book makes it difficult to engage critically. A passage from the book’s introduction sets the tone: “To the end of his life, Trotsky did not see that many of the fundamental tenets of Marxism, which he never doubted, were profoundly wrong.” Volkogonov is so convinced of this that he does not care to specify which tenets of Marxism were profoundly wrong and which were perhaps not so wrong.
Throughout Volkogonov’s book, Trotsky’s political legacy is dismissed in this fashion, as it fails to stand up to the self-evident truth of triumphant liberalism: “Trotsky’s early criticism was very close to the truth;” “He was imbued with a rare inspiration and dedication to a false idea which he fed into people’s minds;” “(The revolution was) of course . . . the consequence of a narrow conspiracy by one radical party.”82 Because everything flows from history’s final and transparent judgment, Trotsky appears retrospectively as psychologically deficient, stubborn, and impervious to the facts. Accordingly, Volkogonov’s work tries to elevate itself by presenting this dysfunction as “interesting,” like all tragic tales of those men who stood so flamboyantly on the wrong side of history. It is thus Volkogonov who, armed with certainty about what is true and what is false, but evidently no sense of irony, gets to portray Trotsky as an incorrigible dogmatist: “Trotsky’s interpretation of the events of 1917 is severely constrained within the canonical framework of Marxist theory, and thus is fundamentally limited and narrow, rejecting the possibility that any other view may be valid.”83

Unlike Kolakowski, however, Volkogonov is more vacuous than dishonest. His six-page account of Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution describes some of the basic historical details of its origins, and then falls back on a tired and uncomprehending account of it: “At its basis was the idea of revolution as the highest good. It represented the primacy of the subjective over the objective, revolution for the sake of revolution.”84 This account of Trotsky as an ultraleftist adventurer, as pure revolutionary impulse detached from any sort of strategic and theoretical orientation, originates from the onslaught of Stalinist propaganda beginning from the mid 1920s and continuing uninterrupted in the Soviet Union until its demise. As such, Volkogonov largely repeats a deeply entrenched common sense rather than engaging in conscious slander.

To this reflective property one should add, unsurprisingly, Volkogonov’s reflexive recoil at the sort of revolutionary violence represented and perpetrated by Trotsky: “Mankind, the individual, the nation and the masses remained somewhere on the sidelines, or were at best a means for achieving this total revolution. And it was here that the idea embodied a tendency to resort to coercion . . . Permanent revolution could thus be defined as the historical expression of excess.”85 This sort of unctuous indignation—typical, but especially unseemly in Volkogonov’s case since he was an army general by trade—adds to the general effect and purpose. Trotsky’s value is reduced to a historical curiosity or cautionary tale.86

The chief irony of these two dismissals of Trotsky, of course, is that they were penned by people whose political and professional formations
were Stalinist. Both Kolakowski and Volkogonov spent long and relatively comfortable years as cogs that allowed the Stalinist regime to operate—one in the intellectual, the other in the military sphere. Their inability to assess Trotsky's legacy with a modicum of fairness could no doubt elicit a psychological explanation. It is hardly surprising that Trotsky's legacy would be a touchy subject for such individuals. Any concession on their part to the possibility that Trotsky represented a political, or even merely ethical, alternative to Stalinism would have been tantamount to admitting that their own initial adaptation to it was perhaps less natural or understandable than they liked to believe, and that it was perfectly possible to oppose Stalinism without making the slightest concession to Western imperialism, let alone falling onto its lap.

The active dismissal of Trotsky, however, has not been a phenomenon restricted to ex-Stalinists from the Eastern bloc. A few Western specimens are also available. Robert McNeal's essay “Trotskyist Interpretations of Stalinism” and Peter Beilharz's book *Trotsky, Trotskyism, and the Transition to Socialism* will be discussed here as representative examples.

Beginning with McNeal, while his essay follows the template established by Kolakowski in dismissing its subject by way of a psychological account, it is useful because it focuses specifically on Trotsky's theoretical capacity to make sense of Stalinism and comes to more specific conclusions. McNeal's overall assessment is very negative. His one, not insignificant, concession is to regard Trotsky as a “pioneer,” the first to give Stalinism a proper name and identify it as a specific historical phenomenon beyond the “personal regime of one mortal.”

This is certainly more than Kolakowski was willing to concede. Having perceived its existence as a systemic whole, however, Trotsky was completely unable to make theoretical sense of Stalinism, a “phenomenon that had defeated not only his political aspirations but also his attempts to comprehend it.”

According to McNeal, Trotsky's understanding of Stalinism consisted of wild inaccuracies (“his fantastic perception . . .”), slapdash sophisms (“another equally semantic solution . . .”), and irrational diatribes (“Trotsky’s concept . . . is more polemical than analytic;” “either label was more a handy epithet than a seriously thought-out theory”). Trotsky's faculties extended only as far as “brilliant theoretical journalism,” but not theory proper. This odd genre is notable, and not simply because it only exists in McNeal's imagination. As a backhanded compliment or patronizing concession, it speaks to the difficulties experienced by academic intellectuals in coming to grips with Trotsky's peculiar mode of producing theory—in constant and active engagement with all the pressing political matters of his day. It
is also notable as an illustration of the kind of air of sufficiency lamented by MacIntyre.93

McNeal condemns some of Trotsky's most important positions on Stalinism: his notion that the Stalinist bureaucracy constituted a “caste” rather than a class in the Marxist sense, his use of historical analogies such as “Bonapartism” and “Thermidor,” his insistence on characterizing the Soviet Union as a “degenerated workers’ state,” and his prognosis that it was an unstable, transitional polity rather than a fundamentally stable and permanent one.94

As in the case of Kolakowski, McNeal does this on the basis of significant misrepresentations. His reading of Trotsky's Revolution Betrayed as emphasizing the influence of a residual “old bourgeoisie” to explain the Stalinist degeneration, with only a few moralizing references to the Stalinized party itself, is simply inaccurate.95 The notion that Trotsky's conflict over socialism in one country was “overblown,” for “there was little difference between him and Stalin on this issue”96 is hastily borrowed from Isaac Deutscher (who incidentally is later criticized by McNeal exactly for this position)97 and fails to acknowledge the imposing prima facie difficulties of this argument: the fact that the major factional struggles of the 1920s rotated on that very axis, the substantial differences between the economic program of the Left Opposition and Stalin's forced collectivization, etc. Finally, reducing Trotsky's designation of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers’ state to the presence of purely economic or objective factors98 is superficial and inaccurate, since Trotsky's designation also involved political or subjective factors that he regarded as very important.99

Again, as in Kolakowski's case, McNeal's unflattering assessment seems directed more against an expedient projection deduced from Trotsky's psychological condition than his actual writing. Repeated observations about Trotsky's “frustrations” and “depression” tend to substitute, poorly, for an actual engagement with his writings.100 Unlike Kolakowski, however, who at least spoke from and for a politically identifiable position, McNeal launches his criticism from nowhere in particular. McNeal seems to affirm a commitment to a “science of society,” which he says Trotsky and Trotskyism betrayed for “eschatological faith,” but there is no account of what this might include.101 From this convenient location, McNeal accuses Trotsky of merely defending orthodoxy with a “literal-minded, mechanical Marxism,”102 while at the same time indicting him for groping toward ad hoc explanations and reasoning—for example, in defining the Stalinist bureaucracy as a caste, or for flinging various epithets, such as “Thermidorian,” “Bonapartist,” and “totalitarian” at the regime instead of analyzing it.103 Thus Trotsky is portrayed in
less than coherent fashion as simultaneously an eclectic who falls short of theory and a doctrinaire who suffers from a stifling excess of it. Moreover, McNeal critiques Trotsky for his failure as a Marxist: “Trotsky struggled to avoid making a Marxist analysis of Stalinism.”

McNeal’s complaints against Trotsky for both his excess and deficit of “Marxism” are inconsistent, but also symptomatic of a certain academic habit of elevating oneself above politics. This is not a problem with Beilharz’s book, which in most other respects, however, recapitulates the weaknesses of the literature being reviewed here. As in the previous cases, Trotsky’s arguments are dismissed as self-evidently incorrect against the background of a historical sentence that allows for no appeal. But Trotsky’s inadequacy rests on the common sense of a slightly different historical moment from Kolakowski or Volkogonov’s. This particular book is a product of the 1980s, when, even in far-away Australia, Beilharz’s imagination was captured not by the muscular prose of the cold warrior, and not yet by the end-of-history effluvia, but instead by the allure of “democratic” socialism as a self-evident imperative. Trotsky is inadequate because he does not conform to categorical imperatives such as a commitment to a peaceful (if not pacifist) reformism, to the existing consciousness of the working class, and so on: “It has now become commonplace on the Western left to insist that socialism will be democratic or it will not be at all.”

Like revolutionary movements in general, “Trotskyism” is “mistaken . . . misleading [and] dangerous” because “its democratic impulse is weak, and is structured by the Jacobin legacy; this is why Trotskyism is an obstacle to the cause of socialism. The problem with Jacobinism, stated plainly, is that it is a form of politics which seeks human elevation but kills people: it seeks to improve humanity from above, whether they like it or not. It kills people, or justifies murders by others, and then blames History.”

As in Volkogonov’s case, but from a different standpoint, this sort of moralizing is hardly decisive as a criterion to assess Trotsky or anyone else. Even assuming that Trotsky can be regarded as a representative of this “form of politics,” historically Jacobinism has had many competitors in the business of killing people. Capitalism has killed and continues to do so, and in fact, so have the mealy-mouthed “democratic” socialists that cling to it. They have done so on a grand scale—as in the case of the German SPD’s vote in support of war credits at the outbreak of World War I, or the Menshevik support for the provisional Russian government as it continued the war—or in more modest numbers, as in the case of the political assassination of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. “Democratic” socialism has killed in the past, in these oft-forgotten incidents, as well as more recently, as in the case of the wars in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Indeed, after years of the likes
of Tony Blair, Gerhardt Schroeder and Massimo D’Alema, the appeal of “democratic” socialism as a political prospect or moral high ground has lost the luster of self-evidence, and the argumentative force of Beilharz’s book has suffered mightily from this more recent turn of events.

Beilharz’s ruthless exposition of the many ways in which Trotsky was not a social democrat is not particularly interesting. But the fact that he singles out Trotsky’s political legacy is notable. Beilharz writes, “Bolshevism is an extension of this [Jacobin] tradition, and Trotskyism is its most developed theoretical expression.” In part, this assessment of Trotsky’s legacy is conjunctural, because it is tied to the particular moment marked by the “Eurocommunist” turn—the process by which European Stalinism began to turn against Moscow and all that it represented and look with increasing comfort to the old ideological parameters established by the Second International. Beilharz’s standpoint is thus that of the puffed-up “democratic” socialist, vindicated at last by the reorientation and recantations of his former Stalinist adversaries. It is exactly as international Stalinism receded that the field was cleared, leaving Trotsky and Trotskyism as the increasingly conspicuous, unrepentant, and lingering manifestation of the “Jacobin” (i.e., revolutionary) tradition. But if Beilharz’s concern and motivation spring from this conjunctural moment, they also point to a more permanent suspicion: that Trotsky and his political legacy, in spite of its defeats and its small and embattled existence, do in fact crystallize what remains alive and dangerous in Marxism and the Russian Revolution. This is the same suspicion of Trotsky that, as I suggested, usually leads to silence, but in Beilharz is expressed consciously and addressed directly.

While at some level Beilharz does recognize in Trotsky a serious challenge or danger, this does not mean that his actual engagement with Trotsky’s legacy is more advanced or serious than the other authors discussed here—only much longer. And the fact that Beilharz identifies “Trotskyism” as the “most developed theoretical expression” of Bolshevism does not guarantee a serious engagement with it as a theory. Beilharz’s book consists of a litany of superficial dismissals. What distinguishes this work in particular is that Beilharz’s indictment relies to a considerable degree on postmodernism, particularly on its emphasis on language and metaphors and its abhorrence for teleology. On this score, “Trotskyism” fails because “so much of its vocabulary is ‘dead’ metaphor, banal, or even fatal.” Paul Ricoeur and Roland Barthes provide the framework for this assessment:

Live, or vivifying metaphor we can, with Ricoeur, define as that which adds or creates meaning, which allows the intuitive perception of the
similar in the dissimilar. Dead, or deceptive metaphor in this context, claims to reveal similarity or identity (for example, between French and Russian history) at the expense of their differences. As Barthes suggests, in its myth-function it naturalises history, hereby making it conform to the putatively general contours of revolution . . . The function of Trotskyism, as a rhetorical historiography, is not enlightenment but persuasion. It is a discourse of closure, a monologue of resplendent elegance, rather than an invitation to dialogue.\textsuperscript{110}

Beilharz’s maneuver certainly adds an atypical twist to the dismissals of Trotsky, but hardly strengthens it, because postmodernism itself here appears as a commonplace. The ethos of difference and contingency, the superiority and necessity of enlightenment (!), and dialogue over closure and persuasion are invoked here as self-evidently true—”commonplaces,” much in the same way as “democratic” socialism is presented, but even less effective, because they are one step removed from the field of actual politics.\textsuperscript{111}

The postmodern gloss on Beilharz’s arguments thus does not prevent them from turning against their author. His attack of Trotsky’s \textit{History of the Russian Revolution}—as mythology in Barthes’ sense, because it “presents a system of values as a system of facts,” and as dictated by a “necessitarian plot”—is entirely dependent on the same devices, which happen to accurately describe how Beilharz’s commitment to the self-evidence of “democratic” socialism is made to pass as an analytical and critical tool.\textsuperscript{112} Indeed it should not be difficult to see that Beilharz is merely translating in the language of postmodernism the same simple, and far from compelling assertion: “[Trotskyism] is a language of the past, representing a retrospective politics rather than a radical or democratic socialist politics for the West today.” In other words, Trotsky is not a “democratic” socialist, at a time when it has “become commonplace” to be one. To make this charge is tantamount to asserting that Trotskyism is passé, an argument that would be compelling only in certain circles in Paris and Milan. Beilharz need not have disturbed Barthes and Ricoeur to make such claims, but evidently he believes that to adapt oneself not just to the prevailing fashion in politics, but in academia as well, is to double the strength of the argument.

Beilharz pushes his attack even further, when, rather than confining himself to the realm of logic and rhetoric, he ventures in some truly implausible territory. Incredibly, he remarks on Trotsky’s inability to understand the importance of violence and political struggle. “True to his early pseudonym, the ‘Pen’ [Trotsky’s nickname as a young political journalist] never fully understood the limits of its power against the sword.”\textsuperscript{113} It is in this case
that McIntyre’s warning ought to resound most loudly, for here Beilharz’s Lilliputian lack of proportions assumes a truly grotesque character. Trotsky’s experience as a revolutionary and military commander is trumped, ex post facto, by someone whose weapons of choice are found in the mighty arsenal of . . . French philosophy.114

Beilharz is incapable of engaging with Trotsky’s argument, seeing only “dead language” and a dogmatic teleology. Time and again, he presents Trotsky’s arguments as relying on unwarranted “presuppositions,”115 to “assert . . . what [they] must prove,” to operate by means of a “conclusion established in advance.”116 In reality, it is Beilharz’s argument that relies on self-evident commonplaces to dismiss Trotsky. For example, Beilharz’s scandalized remark that Revolution Betrayed “as Bolshevik criticism, . . . is entirely immanent, measuring Stalinism only against the image of October without beginning to criticize Bolshevism itself”117 is made as though the need to criticize the October Revolution was somehow self-evident. It is again the commonplaces of “democratic” socialism that carry the weight of the argument. As I will show in the next chapter, Trotsky had to develop actual arguments exactly because he could not rely on the commonplaces of his age and because he had to work against the current, expressed not simply as generalized common sense, but as actual political pressure. Similarly, Beilharz presents Max Weber’s analysis of bureaucracy as something inherent in modernization as received truth against Trotsky’s approach to it.118 Merely stating Weber’s alternative approach, however, does not prove its correctness. Moreover, behind the determinist relation in Weber between “modernisation and bureaucratization,” one can only detect the sort of “teleology” that Beilharz so readily chastises in Trotsky. Teleological attacks against teleology are a recurring feature of Beilharz’s book. His observation that in Trotsky’s 1905 one could already find “the seeds of the philosophy of history later to be modified and made explicit”119 manages to be both teleological and to resort to the kind of biological metaphors Beilharz denounces as illegitimate.120 Beilharz’s argument about an incipient Jacobinism in Trotsky’s early “spontaneist” account of the 1905 revolution is also itself teleological.121 And Beilharz’s praise of the young Trotsky’s “prescient” understanding of the seeds of totalitarianism in Bolshevism depends on the teleological platitude characteristic of most of Sovietology, according to which the worst excesses of Stalinism can be found, in embryonic form, in Lenin’s What is to be Done?122

One last feature of Beilharz’s critique is worth nothing here. Like McNeal, Beilharz specifically attacks Trotsky’s account of the Stalinized Soviet Union as a degenerated workers’ state. The inadequacy of Trotsky’s argument is, customarily, based on a psychological assessment: “Since he
constituted his personal and political identity with singular reference to the Soviet Union Trotsky was in no position to analyse it adequately.” Beilharz obviously believes himself to be in a better position to carry out this task, and the results of his attempt are instructive: “The conclusion should . . . be that the regime is a stable regime of domination with some similarities to capitalism as well as some striking differences.” This alternative diagnosis freely mixes political and economic elements without alerting us about how the two interact, and merely registers empirical “facts” in the blandest of comparisons—is one not guaranteed to find “similarities” and “differences” across the entire landscape of the human experience? But leaving aside its scarce sociological merits, it is more important to note that Beilharz’s diagnosis rests on the “stability” of the regime as yet another self-evident truth. Indeed, Beilharz does not so much offer a diagnosis as register the mundane fact that the USSR existed, circa 1987, when he published his work. Thus Beilharz’s critique adds a third commonplace to the political commonplace of “democratic” socialism and the ethical commonplace of postmodernism. But history has a way of overturning commonplaces, and not long after the ink had dried on Beilharz’s pages, it happened to do just that.

II. WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE . . . BRINGING TROTSKY ON STAGE

Dear Sirs, I am indebted to you for your so unexpected and flattering proposal, to put me up as candidate for the rectorate of your university . . . The elections to the rectorate, you write, are conducted on a non-political basis and your letter itself is signed by representatives of every political tendency. But I myself occupy too definite a political position; all my activity has been and remains devoted to the revolutionary liberation of the proletariat from the yoke of capital . . . I would . . . consider it a crime toward the working class and a disloyalty toward you to appear on no matter what public tribunal not under the Bolshevik banner. You will find, I have no doubt, a candidate much more in conformity with the traditions of your university.

Leon Trotsky—To the students of Edinburgh University

I have attempted to show that the academic orientation toward Trotsky can be described as a prevailing silence, haunted by the unacknowledged presence of certain aspects of Trotsky’s thought and punctuated by occasional active dismissals of a crass ideological character. Completing this account requires taking measure of a third type of intervention. Here I will briefly discuss those who have recognized and attempted to highlight the importance of Trotsky
in a more or less sympathetic manner. This group is quite small. It consists, first, of scholars whose appreciation of Trotsky is purely academic, disconnected from a broader political project or assessment; second, of those whose appreciation is richer and more politically charged, but still fundamentally limited and disengaged; and finally, of those who have attempted in one way or another to place Trotsky at the center of a reconsideration of Marxism as well as at the center of the most important political prospects of the epoch.

In the first case, attention to Trotsky seems induced simply by the existing lacuna in the academic literature. Since academia abhors a vacuum, these scholars simply rush to fill it, offering a “balanced” and in many cases superficial assessment without much appreciation for the reasons explaining the prevailing neglect of Trotsky or much of a sense of the political and historical stakes involved. Examples of this literature are Baruch Knei-Paz’s *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky*, and Ian Thatcher’s more recent biography, *Trotsky*.

The first is a long, expository work that if nothing else does some justice to the range of topics and problems addressed by Trotsky. Knei-Paz, however, asserts a strict methodological commitment to the history of ideas, understood as their conscious removal from the political context and struggles from which they emerged. This procedure, inadvisable in general, is particularly costly in trying to approach Trotsky. Knei-Paz engages in a review of Trotsky’s ideas as though the massive struggles and reversals in Germany, Spain, China, or the Soviet Union itself never occurred and as though these ideas were merely the output of a series of purely theoretical considerations. He promises to show how Trotsky is supposed to rise and fall based on “the contradictions of his own intellectual preconceptions.” But in fact, with few exceptions, Knei-Paz’s book is more of a long exposition than a critical assessment, even if we accept that the latter should be confined to the level of ideas. This approach, paired to a stodgy writing style, condemns Knei-Paz’s work to a palpable pedantry, as it neutralizes the dynamic political and historical charge of Trotsky’s life and legacy as well as its dramatic qualities.

Thatcher’s work is an introduction to Trotsky that is not limited to the contradictions of his thought, but also engages with some of the important political and historical questions. The author is an academic specialist on Trotsky who has published extensively. The book is supportive of Trotsky in some instances—for example, of his correct appraisal of the 1905 revolution, or, surprisingly, of his much vilified *Terrorism and Communism*. And it is critical in other instances—of Trotsky’s “simplistic approach” to the problem of world revolution, his “one-sided conception of fascism,” and his failure to predict “a likely Holocaust.” In the absence of a more robust and upfront
account of what is at stake, however, Thatcher’s analysis of Trotsky necessarily reads like an arbitrary scorecard. Moreover, particularly in matters of this sort, it is always legitimate to ask from what standpoint this accounting of losses and gains might be offered, and even to suspect that the real books may be stashed elsewhere, being less than presentable for a political audit. Like Knei-Paz, Thatcher notes that what distinguishes his contribution are his inclination and capacity to provide an appraisal that is objective and free of partisanship. But to claim that “Trotsky’s life cries out for a more dispassionate study” is not just to offer inadequate assurances—as in most cases, the author would be better served by full disclosure—but also to profoundly misunderstand the subject of the study. If there is anything peculiar to Trotsky’s life, it is its irrepressibly partisan quality, its ambition to attain objectivity exactly through partisan subjectivity and a process of constant polemical friction and political struggle. Thatcher may or may not be guilty of the sort of “treacherous objectivity” of the stealth reactionary criticized by Trotsky in his time. But his attempt to attain objectivity on the cheap is certainly unconvincing as well as deflating. Part of what makes Trotsky’s life compelling is that it is a knot through which the most important and politically charged threads of twentieth-century history have passed. The most superficial and timid review of his life will immediately confront the would-be innocent and detached observer with profound and strategic judgments that are neither possible nor desirable to avoid.

This is not to say that the work produced by Knei-Paz and Thatcher is of no value. Knei-Paz’s book can be a useful general resource, and Thatcher, in an earlier book, highlighted an interesting and neglected aspect of Trotsky’s legacy: his work as a journalist and war correspondent. Nonetheless, these works avoid confronting the higher stakes involved in an assessment of Trotsky’s significance, while at the same time succeed in the difficult task of rendering him dull. In this type of work, one will look in vain for a sense of the personal tragedy, historical grandeur, or political urgency in Trotsky’s life. In reading these authors’ descriptions of Trotsky, one encounters not of one of Hegel’s world-historical men, but rather the unsuspecting victim of the vagaries of the academic market who has turned up in one of its cramped niches.

The second type of intervention I wish to discuss is made by scholars who have displayed a more lively appreciation of Trotsky’s legacy and whose assessments are not purely academic, but contain a certain political charge. Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, is no pedantic Trotsky “specialist” and is well-aware of the questions of historical magnitude and political stakes involved in dealing with a figure of this sort. Some of MacIntyre’s work, such as the essays “Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?” and “The Indispensability
of Political Theory” are valuable and interesting attempts to smuggle Marxism and sometimes Trotsky in particular into debates where they, by most mainstream accounts, do not belong. But in considering MacIntyre’s work and interventions more generally, it should be clear that his real interests lie elsewhere and that Trotsky performs for him an auxiliary and in some ways debasing function. In his long descent toward religion and moral philosophy, MacIntyre has held on to Trotsky as some sort of red parachute.

It is true that for MacIntyre Trotsky is a hero—noble, tragic, and not to be forgotten, dismissed, or slandered by clueless academics. Indeed he is one of MacIntyre’s many heroes—St. Benedict and Eleanor Marx, St. Theresa and John Stuart Mill. At first glance, confronted with this remarkable list of saints and sinners, one suspects that such eclectic selections—some of which, unable to pass customs at the gates of heaven, will have to be abandoned when that time comes—may actually be a provocation directed at easily scandalized colleagues. The fact that MacIntyre is actually serious hardly matters, since this sort of hodgepodge is only suitable for personal consumption. In this MacIntyre does not distinguish himself from the many academics who concoct flavorful and exotic blends (Heidegger and Gramsci, Luxemburg and Butler) in the aesthetic, ethical, and endless other realms, only to serve the same familiar and unwholesome slop when it comes to politics: there is no alternative to capitalism.

MacIntyre in not shy about this last point. We are condemned to live in the house of capitalism for the foreseeable future, and this is many ways a lamentable thing. But luckily there are some wonderful toys in the attic, where Nietzsche and Aristotle are available to enact endless battles to the philosophical death. There is also room for Trotsky in that happy place, but for a very peculiar reason. In spite of the lack of philosophical inclinations on his part, Trotsky is important because it is he who can help even the most hardened political optimist recognize that “Marxism is exhausted as a political tradition,” and that indeed there is “no tolerable alternative . . . to . . . advanced capitalism.” This most peculiar lesson is extorted on the basis of an often cited text in which the later Trotsky is said to have at last renounced Marxism and his notorious revolutionary optimism, or at least to have suggested that he would do so eventually, given enough time. As in the case of his invocation of St. Theresa, MacIntyre’s appropriation of Trotsky does not seem to be malicious. It is not intended as a provocation against a different set of believers. It is clear that MacIntyre genuinely admires many aspects of Trotsky’s legacy—the towering intellect, the courage and commitment in opposing the “self-image of the age,” etc. But this is chicken soup for the troubled soul, not politics.
In sum, though MacIntyre sees the major political questions as already decided, Trotsky will remain his valuable and remarkable trinket—the sparkling, precious fragment of a shattered tradition that will never be reassembled. MacIntyre’s engagement with Trotsky is thus episodic, only loosely connected to what are regarded as the more important questions. He is a useful additive, injecting verve and heroism in the excessively starchy (but critical!) debates between communitarians and liberals or in the latest crusades threatening to turn the world of moral philosophy upside-down (or right-side up, as may be the case). This kind of appreciation has its moments, at least in a literary sense, and also has some value to the degree that it is able to express very clearly and forcefully certain aspects of Trotsky’s legacy against academia’s prevailing disinterest. Detached from a political movement or from a project to revitalize Marxism, however, MacIntyre’s work amounts to an interesting but limited academic self-criticism against inattention and flippancy toward a venerable, monumental figure. But all in all, this approach will not take matters very far, and in fact, when considered from the standpoint of seeking to place Trotsky at the center of a political and historical reconsideration of Marxism’s history and prospects, it could even be considered counterproductive.

The case of Sebastiano Timpanaro is a variation on this theme. Timpanaro is an Italian intellectual whose only appearance on the broader academic scene was a collection of essays published by Verso as *On Materialism*. This was an attempt to defend the materialist foundations and scientific character of Marxism against the prevailing tendencies of Western Marxism. In it, Timpanaro appealed to the need to recover Leon Trotsky, a figure that “to this day, with grave injustice, is generally passed over in silence or simply excommunicated.” This intervention can be compared to MacIntyre’s. In the first place, the standpoint from which Timpanaro intervenes is somewhat displaced, because his relation to academia was relatively remote. He was for the most part a middle-school teacher and editor, who only had a brief foray into university teaching. He was, moreover, politically active first in the Italian Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity (PSIUP), and then in the Proletarian Unity Party (PDUP), some of the Italian leftist parties that attempted to resist, or at least mediate, the hegemony of the Stalinized Italian Communist Party (PCI). This was not, in other words, the purely personal appreciation offered by MacIntyre. In Timpanaro’s case, the motivation was a frustration with what he rightly perceived to be an unhealthy turn within Marxism—understood not merely as an intellectual tradition, but as a political current as well—and his belief that Trotsky could serve as a necessary antidote to cure it, rather than definitively prove its demise.
Timpanaro’s intervention remained, however, a feeble one. In *On Materialism*, he offered nothing more than his “unconcealed sympathy for . . . Trotsky” and only passing praise for Trotsky’s “superior” analysis of Stalinism. Alongside Trotsky, and actually in a far more extensive and developed manner, Timpanaro placed early nineteenth-century Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi, an extraordinarily sensitive, physically fragile man who was far more motivated by the poetics of village life than by the political failure of Napoleon’s sweep through Europe. It is no accident that Leopardi is usually not dragged into the political arena, or, for that matter, outside of the Italian literary context. The pairing of Trotsky and Leopardi is an unlikely and almost surreal conception, perhaps more so than MacIntyre’s waiting for a new incarnation of St. Benedict. It is unlikely because, in spite of Timpanaro’s insistence that Leopardi’s pessimism is of the right sort—“materialist,” and not the “romantic and existentialist” sort afflicting Western Marxism—on this apparently simple matter, there is little room for compromise. Trotsky’s perennial revolutionary optimism was not a matter of psychological disposition, but the political combination of his will and intellect. Therefore, while Timpanaro’s intervention is not purely personal and is more solidly grounded in a political terrain than MacIntyre’s, in the end it remains just as episodic—a mere expression of political sympathy that also does not take one very far.

Irving Howe’s *Leon Trotsky* provides another variation on this theme, moving us closer to a more concrete and comprehensive assessment of Trotsky’s significance. Like MacIntyre, Howe recognizes the historical scope of this figure—“one of the titans of our century” and an individual of “heroic magnitude.” Against the approach taken by Knei-Paz, Howe is also clear, at least in principle, on the ties binding Trotsky’s ideas to the living political struggles in which they were produced. Nonetheless, Howe’s assessment of Trotsky’s legacy remains limited and truncated. With regard to theory, although Howe recognizes Trotsky as a prolific and immensely talented writer whose work stands as one of the “classics of modern political thought,” he believes that Trotsky’s understanding of Stalinism was fundamentally inadequate. With regard to practice, Howe believes that while Trotsky’s political courage in the face of Stalinism puts many ex–fellow travelers and latter-day anti-Stalinists to shame and will thus remain inspiring for generations, his political legacy of opposition cannot serve as the foundation for a viable socialist politics. Accordingly, Howe came to regard Trotskyism, the political embodiment of this unity of theory and practice, as a “petrified ideology.”

Howe’s approach to Trotsky is therefore similar to the kind being reviewed here: not purely academic, well-aware of the historical and political
stakes involved, sympathetic at least in some ways, and in the end still detached and inert. But Howe exemplifies a more specific milieu of disaffected, and in most cases American, ex-Trotskyists. The typical trajectory here began with a flirtation, often merely of the Platonic sort, with Trotskyism as a cogent and principled opposition both to Stalinism and Western imperialism. But soon this would give way to a lopsided moral recoiling against the Soviet Union as an absolute evil, which corresponded to a subtle, and in many cases not-so-subtle, reconsideration of the relative merits of American imperialism. As in the case of Howe, this would often be accompanied by a reconsideration of the October Revolution as itself problematic and fundamentally implicated with Stalinism. In Howe’s case, this did not get in the way of a lingering personal and in some ways political appreciation for Trotsky. In other cases, it led to dramatic swings to the right, toward the most uncompromising layers of cold war anti-communism.151

The last and most important type of intervention I will discuss here goes beyond acknowledging that Trotsky is a remarkable historical figure that remains inspiring in some ways and was right in some specific historical controversies. Here I will discuss the rarer attempts to place Trotsky at the center of a larger project to reconsider and revitalize Marxism for our age.

First, it should already be clear that the existing literature attempting to call attention to Trotsky’s significance in this way has so far failed to overcome the sort of resistance, the committed disinterest I have attempted to illustrate earlier. Part of the reason for this failure must be sought in the weaknesses of the literature itself. In particular, some of this work has not been able to explain and emphasize the relation between Trotsky’s theoretical significance and the importance of his opposition and political alternative to Stalinism, often because it consciously rejected this link.

The best example of this tendency is the work of Isaac Deutscher. His justly famous biographical trilogy on Trotsky is undoubtedly indispensable as a historical record, endowed with remarkable literary qualities, and will always remain politically inspiring in many ways. While the trilogy is often characterized as some sort of fawning tribute to Trotsky, a less obvious but no less important dimension of it tends to go unnoticed.152 Deutscher’s work was in fact as much an attempt to underscore what he perceived to be Trotsky’s crucial political limitations as it was a powerful portrait of Trotsky’s historical grandeur. Deutscher’s story was carefully calibrated to demonstrate the following argument. As a historical figure, Trotsky embodied the best elements of the Russian Revolution and the international communist movement, and Stalinism indeed represented a degeneration of that tradition. However, the former did not constitute a political alternative to the
latter. The thought and action of the early Trotsky—in 1905, in 1917, and again in the Civil War and in the construction of the young Soviet republic—had world-historical significance. But the political activity of the later Trotsky—the one who led a political movement opposing both Stalinism and imperialism, the one who built a Fourth International in opposition to the Stalinized Third, the one who called for a political revolution in the Soviet Union—was hopeless, redundant, or worse. It was Stalinism, in fact, that would continue to advance the cause of socialism worldwide, in spite of all its distortions and brutalities. Deutscher, in other words, built a literary monument to Trotsky that, however moving and impressive, from a political standpoint was intended to remain a decoration.

At the end of the remarkable story told by Deutscher, Trotsky of course “wins,” but only and precisely to the extent that Stalinism was objectively compelled to grope towards Trotsky’s correct positions, eventually to reform itself and its excesses, and, in spite of itself, to push socialism forward in the USSR and internationally. Deutscher’s thesis of Trotsky’s “victory in defeat” is wanting in several respects. First, at the level of theory, it flows from the fetishism for purely “objective” conditions. It constitutes a relapse into a certain form of economism, according to which the inevitability of socialism is guaranteed by its superiority as a mode of production, regardless of the political regime overseeing it—the same economism that Trotsky had fought against throughout his life. This tendency appears, for example, in Deutscher’s criticism of Trotsky’s conceptualization of the role of the individual in history and in his understanding of the inevitable physiological decline of revolutionary movements. It appears most clearly in Deutscher’s strategic political perspective concerning not only the historical inevitability of Stalinism, but also its capacity to advance revolutionary and socialist progress, in however distorted and costly fashion. According to Deutscher, the international advance toward socialism could not but pass through the political agency of the Stalinist regime. The post-World War II social transformation of the Eastern European countries engineered by Stalinism at the point of a gun, for instance, was understood as a definite step forward toward socialism. In the realm of theory, this translated into the recognition of these as “worker’s states,” marred by political distortions and blemishes in the same way as the Soviet Union was. From this perspective, the objective outcome—the nationalization of the means of production—was decisive, not the political means by which it accomplished.

The transition to socialism was thus conceptualized as a process of “revolution from above” propelled by Stalinism. On this score, Deutscher’s thinking was similar to Gramsci’s reflections, which were centered on the
concept of “passive revolution.” In both cases, the crucial historical analogy was the French Revolution—specifically, how its political exhaustion had been followed by an international extension of its social achievements by military means in the Napoleonic era. Deutscher’s political conclusions on this matter, however, were decidedly firmer than Gramsci’s, and this had theoretical implications that clearly tended to pull him away from Marxism. The decisive processes leading to revolutionary change were in fact understood not to be class struggle and the agency of political parties, but rather the more traditional means of military and diplomatic action.158

Deutscher’s approach, to be sure, also constituted a creeping adaptation in the face of Stalinism as an imposing, established power: an unwillingness to resist Stalinism’s dead weight and inertia, a tendency endow it with generative powers, and an inclination to cling to it as best as possible while holding one’s nose at the same time. In comparison, Trotsky’s remarkable achievement was not only to resist a theoretical backsliding towards economism, but also the psychological lure of coming to political terms with Stalinism in the epoch of its apparent triumph. The latter fate struck not just Deutscher, but also more important figures, such as Evgeni Preobrazhensky, Karl Radek, and many other Bolsheviks who had played a prominent role both in the Russian Revolution and in the initial opposition to Stalinism. Unlike the “conciliationist” elements that under difficult circumstances peeled off of the Left Opposition to join the regime, Deutscher’s adaptation to Stalinism took a more contemplative and academic turn. Having decided that socialism could develop on automatic pilot, Deutscher removed himself from the political arena, and retreated into a “watch-tower” from which he could observe “with detachment and alertness this heaving chaos of a world, to be on a sharp lookout for what is going to emerge from it, and to interpret it sine ira et studio.”159

At the level of theory, Deutscher’s thesis also stands on an overtly narrow understanding of Stalinism based on its programmatic features, and more generally underestimates its geographic and temporal scope, to say nothing of the depth of its reactionary effects.160 Deutscher, for example, understood the process initiated by Nikita Khrushchev’s “secret speech” as genuine, if contradictory and incomplete, de-Stalinization. He believed, moreover, that the self-reform of the system would eventually be completed under the aegis of existing political institutions.161 In doing so, Deutscher once again distanced himself from Trotsky, who had instead come to believe that the Stalinist bureaucracy could not reform itself and that either a political revolution would dislodge it from power, revitalizing the prospects for communism worldwide in the process, or that the bureaucracy itself would
eventually engineer the restoration of capitalism in Russia. Deutscher’s approach is especially unfortunate because at some level he was perfectly aware of the necessity to see Stalinism as “a complex phenomenon, which needs to be viewed from many angles.” Nonetheless, he never wavered from his convictions about the progress of de-Stalinization and thus underestimated the scope and consequences of Stalinism.

Exactly for this reason, Deutscher’s thesis also failed historically. History has not found an “objective,” “unconscious” shortcut toward socialism, in Russia or anywhere else, and is not likely to do so. The Stalinist bureaucracy, far from reforming itself in the process of advancing toward socialism, actually engineered the restoration of capitalism in Russia—a possibility Trotsky had foreseen with great clarity and had opposed to the best of his political ability. In light of those events, Deutscher’s following appraisal of the developments in the Soviet Union should today be easily recognizable as mistaken:

Since Stalinism had become an anachronism, nationally and internationally, and a break with it had become an historic necessity for the Soviet Union, the ruling group itself had to take the initiative of the break. Thus by an irony of history Stalin’s epigones began the liquidation of Stalinism and thereby carried out, malgré eux memes, parts of Trotsky’s political testament. But can they continue this work, and complete it? Or is a political revolution still necessary? On the face of it, the chances of a revolution are still as slender as they were in Trotsky’s days, whereas the possibilities of reform are far more real . . . History may therefore yet vindicate the Trotsky who had for twelve or thirteen years struggled for reform rather than the Trotsky who, in his last five years, preached revolution.

Deutscher was careful in admitting that his “can only be a tentative conclusion” and that “Only experience, in which there may be more surprises than are dreamt of in any philosophy, can provide the answer.” It is not possible, however, to take Deutscher seriously when he wrote that he would “leave the final judgment on Trotsky’s idea of a political revolution to a historian of the next generation.” After all, Deutscher had cast his definitive judgment in the realm of political practice when he directly opposed the founding of the Fourth International. In this sense, Deutscher’s failure was not simply a mistaken prediction, but a broader failure of historical perspective, one based on the automatic guarantees of economism and the conviction that Stalinism was only an unfortunate bump on the road to socialism.
In taking measure of Deutscher’s perspective and its historical track record, one should refer not only to the collapse of the Soviet Union, but to related and still ongoing processes as well. Many of the petty-bourgeois nationalist organizations that had been regarded as progressive and oppositional are going through a process of dramatic ideological and political reorientation. The same can be said of those revolutionary movements and regimes in the Third World that operated from a class foundation consciously and strategically removed from the precepts of classical Marxism, relying for example on the peasantry rather than the working class—and in some cases in virulent opposition to the working class. This vast array of forces operated for the most part in a practical political alliance with Stalinism, but in any case always in an essential deeper connection with it. Even in the midst of conjunctural conflicts there was always a powerful ideological affinity. Exotic concoctions as varied as Deng Xiaoping’s “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” Muammar Gaddafi’s or Benazir Bhutto’s “Islamic socialism,” and Julius Nyerere’s “Ujamaa” can be considered mere variants of the Stalinist strategic outlook of “socialism in one country.”

The recent fate of the international partners and byproducts of Stalinism—organizations such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) or regimes such as those ruling Libya and China, all at one point or another hailed by various quarters as viable alternatives to capitalism—should provide sufficient illustration of how the collapse of the Soviet Union swept away not only a specific regime and a set of institutions, but a remarkable, epochal array of delusions, compromises, and adaptations made in the name of advancing toward socialism. At the core of Deutscher’s perspective was the intuition that since such organizations and regimes argued for, and in many cases actually accomplished, the nationalization of property, they were able to advance, in practice and “objectively,” the cause of socialism regardless of their “subjective” political confusions and unorthodox class alignments. The existing, ready-at-hand forces of the disparate anti-imperialist bloc and the Stalinist world constituted the necessary and sufficient material for the victory of socialism, since this inevitable process could succeed by putting to use a series of blunt instruments.

It is against this ongoing reorientation or outright collapse, in Russia and worldwide, that the political work of the later Trotsky which Deutscher opposed should assume an added significance. In opposing Stalinism, in fact, the Fourth International also opposed adaptations and false shortcuts of this sort, insisting that the only possible path to socialism passed through the political destruction of Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and
the creation of a genuinely Marxist international movement based on the political independence of the working class. Neither Trotsky's permanent revolution nor the actual international political development toward socialism could ever be vindicated “objectively” as they were trampled upon “subjectively.” This is not to say that one should revel in defeats and that only defeats, in some cases cataclysmic ones, can validate Trotsky's perspective. After all, it is not possible to conclude that these defeats have corresponded to the unambiguous triumph of world capitalism. The behavior of the Bush administration, acting as an arsonist in foreign and domestic politics, in international and constitutional law, is the clearest and most systematic expression of a deep-seated crisis, not of one person’s low IQ and impulsive personality or the jolly enthusiasm of the victor engaged in a minor mop-up operation. The real background is thus not simply the collapse of false “left” alternatives, but the prospect of the mutual destruction of the contending classes and imperialist barbarism on a worldwide scale. It is against this background that the claims about the political significance of Trotsky’s legacy—including Deutscher’s—ought to be assessed.

Deutscher’s perspective is important not just in its own right, but also because it is the fountainhead of several more or less closely affiliated approaches to Trotsky, particularly with respect to the question of Stalinism. One of the most important components of this “Deutscherian” cluster is the work of Ernest Mandel. Like Deutscher’s work, Mandel’s efforts to explain the significance of Trotsky's legacy were considerable and still stand as one of the most important points of entry toward its appreciation. Like Deutscher, and for the same reasons, Mandel understood Trotsky’s significance in a truncated way. Mandel’s case, however, is complicated by the fact that for at least some time he operated from within the confines of the Trotskyist movement. Mandel had in fact initially accepted the necessity of a Fourth International in response to the utter bankruptcy of Stalinism, joining its ranks under difficult circumstances and ascending to a leadership position. His appreciation of Trotsky’s legacy, consequently, at least at some level included Trotsky’s later political work that Deutscher had dismissed as hopeless or, worse, counter-productive. Consequently, against Deutscher’s objectivism Mandel could also correctly identify as one of Trotsky’s most important merits the fact that he “attributed to the subjective factor in history a decisive role in the drama of our century.”

Mandel’s weakness, however, derives from the fact that he would eventually alter his appraisal of the significance of the Fourth International. Mandel became, in fact, the most recognizable theorist and public face of “Pabloism,” a political current within the Fourth International that
attempted to steer it away from Trotsky’s positions concerning its role as a political force and its opposition to Stalinism. Mandel’s orientation was to uphold at some level the political significance of the movement founded by Trotsky, but in practice to reduce its role to “a sort of subliminal mental process unconsciously guiding the activities of Stalinists, neo-Stalinists, semi-Stalinists and . . . petty-bourgeois nationalists of one type or another.” In the case of Italy, for example, the Pabloite movement for which Mandel provided an ideological articulation resolved to operate from within the ranks of the old Stalinist Communist Party of Italy (PCI), then, after its collapse, of Communist Refoundation (PRC), attempting to influence them and steer their course from within. With respect to the Soviet Union, the expectations for a self-reform of the Stalinist bureaucracy led Mandel to feverishly attempt to divine which particular faction of it would finally accomplish this process. As was the case with Deutscher, he overestimated the significance of Khrushchev’s secret speech and the resulting “de-Stalinization,” speculating on the possibility that various now long-forgotten figures (Mikoyan) and others one wish could be forgotten (Beria) could set into motion a process by which Stalinism would make a final and decisive break with itself. This orientation marked a strategic shift in Mandel—an adaptation to Deutscher’s positions concerning the inevitability and progressive character of Stalinism that was made even more peculiar by the fact that it occurred from within the institutional structure of the Fourth International.

Another important figure whose understanding of Trotsky flows in important ways from Deutscher’s perspective is Perry Anderson, the most well-known and respected scholar in this tradition. Anderson’s contributions, more so than those of Deutscher and Mandel, exceed the parameters of this review. Works such as his comparative history of the absolutist state and his critical history of postmodernism stand as models of scholarship and significantly advance Marxist theory as well. But in his work, Anderson also addressed the question of Trotsky’s significance directly, and it is in those occasions that the connection with Deutscher’s perspective becomes important.

In Anderson’s “Trotsky’s Interpretation of Stalinism,” this connection is revealed in the criticism of Trotsky on the “generative,” rather than merely “degenerative,” character of Stalinism outside of the Soviet Union. Anderson insisted that Stalinism was a “movement,” capable of advancing the progress toward socialism internationally, and in the process of an otherwise sympathetic assessment, charged Trotsky with the inability to recognize this fact. This critique flowed from the same thesis of the worldwide passive revolution advanced by Deutscher. Its significance was to locate a crucial flaw at the heart of the late Trotsky’s project of political opposition and alternative to Stalinism.
Although this was fundamentally the same analysis that in Deutscher’s case was pushed to its full implications leading to an open dismissal of Trotskyism, in Anderson’s case it remained somewhat muted and implicit.

It should be noted, however, that while Anderson in important ways constitutes a mere subset of Deutscher’s approach, his seminal work Considerations on Western Marxism nearly succeeds in transcending these limitations. This remarkable, valuable book elucidates all of the crucial problems involved in an assessment of Trotsky’s legacy, particularly in relation to existing, prevailing versions of Marxism. Anderson begins from a perceptive analysis of Marxism as having suffered a split into two opposite, yet complementary, strands. On one side, the “orthodox” Marxism of the Stalinized Soviet Union had simply obliterated theory and substantially corrupted political practice. On the other, Western Marxism developed in an increasingly stunted fashion. It became detached from political and mass movements, increasingly professionalized and comfortable in academic institutions, concerned more and more with aesthetic and philosophical problems to the exclusion of political and economic ones, and spoke a language that was increasingly specialized, esoteric, and inaccessible to the masses. To the extent that Western Marxists dealt with concrete political questions, they were surprisingly parochial and oriented toward their respective national context. To the extent that they developed Marxist theory, they did so as a professional vocation and with a deep skepticism toward the possibility of its widespread political uses.

As different as the two poles of “Marxism” were, Anderson rightly noted that there was a certain correspondence between the two. This is true in the sense that, beginning from the crucial period of the 1920s, both of them constituted a prolonged and disastrous process of degeneration of Marxism as a tradition—each in its own way was both the symptom and active agent of political defeats. It is also true in the sense that Western Marxism maintained a certain spiritual connection with Moscow. While in many cases Western Marxists were not vulgar apologists for Stalinism, in their mental landscape the epochal prospects for socialism resided in the “actually existing” regimes—the Soviet Union or, in some variants, Maoist China.

In the midst of these political ruins, Anderson identified Trotsky’s legacy as a lost treasure of Marxism: a valuable tradition half-buried and forgotten under the oppressive weight of cold war dichotomies. On all decisive points, Anderson argued that Trotsky’s legacy stood as a healthy counterpoint to Western Marxism: “It concentrated on politics and economics, not philosophy. It was resolutely internationalist, never confined in concern or horizon to a single culture or country. It spoke a language of clarity and urgency, whose finest prose . . . yet possessed a literary quality equal or superior to
that of any other tradition. It filled no chairs in universities. Its members were hunted and outlawed.\textsuperscript{177}

Under difficult circumstances, and against a generalized decay, this Trotskyist tradition had preserved and developed the inheritance of classical Marxism. Indeed from the standpoint of Western Marxism, its political and theoretical merits were difficult to perceive and lost in translation.\textsuperscript{178} Accordingly, this tradition had developed largely “off-stage,” and it was left to Anderson to call attention to it, exactly as it trenchantly exposed many of the glaring, yet normalized, weaknesses of Western Marxism.\textsuperscript{179} Anderson’s argument went boldly against generations of accumulated academic common sense. Its conclusion assigned an exceptional value to the recovery of Trotsky’s legacy. After the “prolonged, winding detour of Western Marxism,” this legacy was an obligatory passage for “any renaissance of revolutionary Marxism.”\textsuperscript{180}

Anderson’s book thus explained in sparkling fashion the problem and the promise of recovering Trotsky’s legacy. But even in this text Anderson’s hopes for a political resurgence, for the forging anew of the unity of revolutionary theory and practice, remain in the end anchored to Deutscher’s strategic perspective because they are not connected to the resurgence of Trotskyism as a specific political movement. Trotsky was deemed crucial to this renaissance in the same way that the rise of a new awareness and appreciation for Trotsky was for Deutscher a crucial instrument by which one should measure the maturity of “left” and socialist developments. These, however, proceeded “objectively” along their own political tracks. Accordingly, Anderson divined the possible signs of this renaissance based on the uprisings of the late sixties and early seventies, hoping that the elevation of Trotsky to a patron saint for these new and decisive conflagrations would come, eventually.\textsuperscript{181} Anderson’s book even concludes by striking a spontaneist note, simply waiting for the time “when the masses themselves speak, [and when] theoreticians—of the sort the West has produced for fifty years—will necessarily be silent.”\textsuperscript{182} This language of passive witnessing of a process already unfolding echoes not only Deutscher’s “objectivism,” but also his retreat to the “watchtower.” While these Deutscherian elements in the text were more implicit and did not detract from the rhetorical force of the book, Anderson’s “afterword,” written later, is a terribly deflating and for the most part unnecessary self-criticism.\textsuperscript{183}

Returning to the broader picture, I have reviewed three different types of interventions designed to call attention to Trotsky’s legacy. The first two, exemplified by writers like Knei-Paz and MacIntyre, express a limited understanding and appreciation of it. I have then argued that for the third and last kind, the most systematic, sympathetic, and politically charged approach,
Isaac Deutscher stands as a pivotal figure. Deutscher set the tone for a specific approach to the question of Trotsky’s significance—one that, while valuable in important respects, was also truncated and characterized by specific distortions. These distortions have to do with the appraisal of Stalinism as an inevitable and, at the end of the day, progressive phenomenon, and with a corresponding dismissal of Trotsky’s later work of political opposition and organization of a new International. This literature, in other words, suffers from the same weakness as that which has attempted to reclaim Gramsci for Marxism while skirting the question of his role in the rise and consolidation of Stalinism. But in this case, the failure is more resounding and decisive, since Trotsky is far more readily associated with that particular question than Gramsci, and his historical record as an oppositionist is far more promising. As the example of Deutscher makes clear, this literature has been partly complicit in producing a specific and recurring version of Trotsky as a tragic Cassandra—insightful, prophetic, and yet politically redundant. While this “prophetic” Trotsky is certainly qualitatively different from Kolakowski’s fortune-teller, and of a very different political sign, it is not the Trotsky I seek to defend here.

It is important to note, however, that the third type of intervention regarding Trotsky’s legacy is not exhausted by the appreciations of Trotsky based on Deutscher’s approach. This category is itself bifurcated into two opposed, yet complementary tendencies. Alongside Deutscher’s approach stands one characterized by a different strategic perspective on Stalinism and the standing of Trotsky’s legacy, as well as by very different political instincts. Its understanding of Trotsky’s legacy is also truncated, but for opposite reasons.

The paradigmatic figure for this latter tendency is Max Shachtman, an American intellectual who initially joined the effort to found the Fourth International but later split over the question of the unconditional defense of the Soviet Union against Western imperialism. Trotsky’s insistence on this point was not a matter of sentimental attachment, but flowed from his analysis of Stalinism as degeneration and of the Soviet Union as a fundamentally unstable, transitional society. But this second tendency judged Trotsky to be too close to Stalinism (and in some variants, criminally complicit in it) to recognize the utter and total bankruptcy of the Soviet Union.

At the level of theory, this tendency rested on one of two variants: either understanding the Soviet Union as an entirely new type of “bureaucratic collectivist” society ruled by a new class, or as a “state capitalist” society ruled by a bureaucracy that, in spite of certain differences, acted as a traditional capitalist class. At the level of political practice, while often beginning in or around the ranks of the Fourth International, this tendency either
swung more or less rapidly toward right-wing pro-imperialist positions (as
was the case of Shachtman), or abandoned the designation of “Trotskyism”
while claiming to maintain revolutionary socialist objectives. Leaving aside
these significant political differences, this tendency groups together figures as
important and diverse as C.L.R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, James Burnham,
Tony Cliff, Alex Callinicos, Anton Ciliga, Milovan Djilas, Robert Brenner,
Sidney Hook, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Max Eastman.

While Deutscher not only sided with the Soviet Union before and dur-
ing the cold war, but also expected that its state resources would serve as the
locomotive of world revolution, this opposite tendency insisted instead that
there was nothing left worth defending in the Soviet Union and in some
cases openly sided with Western imperialism against it. Consequently, while
the first rejected the need for a new revolution in the Soviet Union, expect-
ing its reform from within, the second called for a social, not just political
revolution and for the complete destruction of the existing system. Similarly,
while Deutscher continued to look to the Stalinist bureaucracy as an agent of
socialism in spite of its mistakes and crimes, this tendency saw it either as a
new and monstrous class or as an old-fashioned capitalist one.

On all these matters, Trotsky's analysis of Stalinism as a phenomenon
and his political opposition to it charted a difficult intermediary course that
in my estimation was correct. He insisted that however much the Stalinized
Soviet Union was actually engaged in sabotaging the world revolution, the
main enemy remained imperialism, and in the case of a direct confrontation
called for the unconditional defense of the former against the latter. He called
and fought for a revolution in the Soviet Union, but he understood it as a
political and not a social one, since in spite of its degeneration it remained
a workers' state. Trotsky viewed the Stalinist bureaucracy as a “caste” that
was politically irredeemable, but not as a new or capitalist ruling class. It is
for this reason that Anderson’s description of Trotsky's analysis of Stalinism
as a feat of “political balance” is quite apt.

I have argued here that many of the existing approaches to Trotsky suf-
fer from significant limitations. Even in the cases that are in most respects
sympathetic, and not just in a personal or academic sense, the significance
of Trotsky's legacy has actually been underestimated. Indeed, based on the
existing literature, I have found it necessary at times to defend Trotsky even
against certain forms of “Trotskyism.” This is necessary not because, as it is
sometimes argued in the case of Marx, Trotsky stands above the perceived
vulgarities and banalities of political life. And it is not because the nuance
and delicate sophistication of his thought should not be spoiled by trans-
forming it into a vulgar system. On the contrary, it is necessary because if
Trotsky’s legacy is to succeed as political theory, the validity of his analysis of and political opposition to Stalinism must be understood with great seriousness and precision.

Both the analysis and the opposition, however, unfolded in a complicated way that needs to be elucidated. I will now examine the difficulty and rewards of Trotsky’s “high-wire act” from the 1920s—when his political opposition to Stalinism was paired to his pioneering, but ultimately inadequate, efforts to make theoretical sense of it—to the theoretical maturity and oppositional struggles of the 1930s.
Perry Anderson described Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinism as a remarkable feat of political balance. This is an excellent starting point to discuss the question of its merits and evolution. Anderson’s characterization captures the difficulty of the task confronting Trotsky. This is true, first, as a matter of arriving at a correct analysis of Stalinism. The phenomenon was without historical precedent. Its very appearance as a new and peculiar force remained undetected for obvious reasons by the Stalinists themselves, who for a while concealed their multifarious mutations behind the banner of “Leninist” continuity and only much later smuggled in the designation of “Stalinist” to certify the orthodoxy of their activities. It also remained undetected by the many self-professed friends of the Soviet Union in the West who rushed to its defense only as it degenerated, as well as by myriad enemies who recognized in “Stalinism” at best only the quantitative intensification of all the tendencies that were already present at the moment of the Russian Revolution. Part of Trotsky’s merit was to give this phenomenon a proper name, analytically detaching it from the October Revolution, and forcefully posing the question of its nature, origins, and specificity against a complacency and complicity that transcended most political divisions. From the standpoint of Marxist theory, moreover, the rise of Stalinism pointed to the necessity to revisit some important Marxist concepts (for example, the dictatorship of the proletariat), to examine others that had hitherto been peripheral (such as the question of bureaucracy), and to interrogate the actual political and programmatic content of foundational ideals such as internationalism.

Stalinism, moreover, did not come into the political world fully formed. While at one level its development no doubt consisted of a definite and recognizable downward trajectory, Stalinism traced this general arc of degeneration through a series of smaller shifts and turns at multiple levels, sometimes of a markedly abrupt character. These ranged from the consolidation of the
state and party bureaucracy’s privileges to the liquidation of vast sections of it in the purges (and back again), and from open collaboration with Western democracies to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact on the eve of World War II (and back again).

In addition, some of the turns taken by Stalinism were more important and foundational to its essence than others. For example, the doctrine of popular front and class collaboration proved to be a more lasting and crucial legacy of Stalinism than the doctrine of social fascism and the ultra-leftism of the third period. For these reasons, Trotsky’s analytical task could not be, and was not, resolved once and for all on the basis of a single general formula. It had instead its own development. In constant contact with the changing concrete events within and outside of the Soviet Union (the first Five-year Plan and Hitler’s rise to power, the enactment of the new Soviet constitution and the strangling of the Spanish Revolution, the Moscow trials and the invasion of Finland) Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinism, which developed, revised, and sometimes discarded various theoretical hypotheses and historical analogies (centrism, social patriotism, Thermidor, Bonapartism), comprises a vast body of commentary unfolding through several developmental periods.

At the same time, Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinism was no mere theoretical exercise. It was forged under conditions of extraordinary political pressures. Chased from one country to another, continually parrying blows from many sides, Trotsky was able not simply to analyze Stalinism as a phenomenon, but to formulate an evolving political orientation toward it and to regroup, reorganize, and deploy a political opposition against it. In this respect, and unlike many others who lost their bearings in the sheer confusion and brutality of that age, Trotsky was able to avoid a capitulation to Stalinism in the period of its apparent triumph, and, conversely, an accommodation to the relative comforts and merits of Western democracies. He was able to avoid the despair and generalized pessimism that gripped many intellectuals, as well as the no less enervating isolation derived from seeking complete purity in a political world that at first glance seemed to consist entirely of muck and filth.

Thus, the characterization of “political balance” captures the dynamic, evolving character of Trotsky’s assessment of Stalinism, but also the fact that in the process of developing this conquest at the level of theory Trotsky was able to avoid multiple psychological and political dangers. Although he sometimes hesitated and took a few false steps in this high-wire act, none of these were so severe as to cause a disastrous fall. Unlike many other figures, particularly within the ranks of the communist movement, Trotsky managed
to maintain his balance and arrived at a theoretical and political foundation from which Marxism could be preserved and developed anew.

I. THE EVOLUTION OF TROTSKY’S ANALYSIS OF STALINISM: 1923

Unlike in the case of Gramsci, taking measure of Trotsky’s understanding of and opposition to Stalinism does not require a speculative excavation. This is true in spite of the fact that Trotsky’s thought was subject to falsifications, sometimes of fantastic proportions. The Moscow trials, for example, spewed forth a torrent of lies against him, including that he collaborated with the Gestapo and masterminded a network of assassination and sabotage within the Soviet Union. The trials were also the occasion for a massive attempt to silence Trotsky that involved international machinations, diplomatic maneuvers, and military threats. The distortions of Gramsci’s thought perpetrated by the Italian Communist Party were subtle and mild in comparison.

It is also true that in the very early stages of the rise of Stalinism, Trotsky felt bound by party loyalty and discipline and modulated his criticism and opposition accordingly. This phase, however, did not last long, and in 1926, by the time the issue of Gramsci’s equivocal opposition to Stalinism was resolved by the fascist police in Italy, Trotsky’s opposition had already led to his removal from the Politburo. His expulsions from the party and from the Soviet Union were to follow soon. Indeed, it was exactly the political magnitude of Trotsky’s opposition that made it the center of the international maelstrom that had begun to test severely the political balance of Gramsci among many others communists.

From this point forward, Trotsky (unlike Gramsci) remained politically active and vociferous, answering blow against blow, seeking to turn each personal attack into an occasion to expose the reactionary character of the
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impostors camping out in the Kremlin. As a result, his positions on Stalinism, which as I have already illustrated are still surrounded by a lingering haze of misunderstanding and worse, are for the most part public and readily available. Consequently, the problem of dealing with the kind of contradictory, Machiavellian production of Gramsci as an author by the PCI does not apply in Trotsky’s case, since the political movement associated with him preserved and published his texts for the most part without complications. It is thus possible to trace, with a measure of epistemological transparency, several moments and periods in the evolution of Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinism.

In doing so, it may be considered necessary to begin with a fierce polemic conducted by Trotsky against Lenin in the 1903–4 period. Trotsky warned against what he considered to be the perniciously elitist character of Bolshevism on questions of party organization. According to Trotsky, Lenin’s attitude evoked Robespierre and the Terror. Lenin’s dubious contribution to the political formation of the young Social Democracy in Russia, he warned, was the invention of “substitutionism.” Trotsky denounced this political logic and succinctly exposed its simple and wretched operation: “The party organization is substituted for the party, the Central Committee is substituted for the party organization, and finally a ‘dictator’ is substituted for the Central Committee.”

This statement is the oft-quoted rhetorical climax of Trotsky’s writings in this period, and in fact is in some cases presented as the self-sufficient high point or even the only contribution Trotsky made to our understanding of Stalinism. Given his later complicity in the excesses of Bolshevism, Trotsky’s prescience on this point is typically described as a tragic or ironic fact. In reality, this particular episode represents a false start in the process of tracing Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinism.

Trotsky’s diagnosis of substitutionism sprung from his initial perspective on questions of party organization. On this matter, he was markedly hostile to Lenin as a consequence of the split that took place in 1903 during the formative stages of Russian Social Democracy. Trotsky was particularly opposed to Lenin’s What is to be Done? Trotsky saw in the book the sharpest articulation of an approach toward intraparty life and the proper relationship between party and masses he deemed unacceptable. Trotsky’s position on the character of the coming revolution and the role of the bourgeoisie and the working class would very soon become not only completely alien to Menshevism, but actually leap over to the left of Bolshevism. But until 1917, on the organizational question, Trotsky consistently supported the Menshevist position. The underlying assumptions of this outlook were that party membership should not be reserved for professional revolutionaries, party life should not be regulated by excessive centralism, and party unity should not
be enforced by administrative measures. Trotsky was reacting angrily against the kind of ruthlessness and single-mindedness Lenin displayed in the factional struggles of the day. For him, in any case, existing differences among party members and factions would naturally disappear into the fundamental unity that a revolutionary crisis was bound to forge. Doctrinal diatribes that in tamer times could fester and give rise to unhealthy splits and sectarian squabbles would inevitably melt as the revolutionary temperature rose.

From this standpoint, Lenin’s methods had to be denounced not because they foretold the danger of an incipient totalitarianism, but because they could lead to utter political impotence. A “totalitarian” form of intra-party organization would in fact prove completely incapable of leading the masses to revolution, prevent the development or sever existing organic connections between the party and masses, and reduce party leadership to the futile exercise of flinging hysterical proclamations and directives at an indifferent population. Accordingly, Trotsky did not denounce Lenin as a bloodthirsty tyrant of the future, but lampooned him as the sectarian caricature of Robespierre—a menacing threat only to the extent that his behavior tended to isolate and hinder the development of social democracy.7

Trotsky in this case was therefore not “foreseeing” the coming of Stalinism as the totalitarian degeneration of Bolshevism or offering a succinct prophetic formula that adequately captured the essence of the phenomenon. Placed in its proper context, moreover, Trotsky’s statement about substitutionism was proven to be completely wrong. The political impotence of Bolshevism, allegedly implicit in their centralist organization, was contradicted by the way in which the Russian Revolution actually unfolded. It was contradicted by the remarkable capacity of the Bolshevik party to make tremendous gains in mass organizations and elections—and to win the allegiance of and effectively control the most important soviets and military units—exactly as it retained a strong centralist direction. It was contradicted, in addition, by the Bolsheviks’ ability to lead the masses at a time when other parties were completely disoriented by the course of events and were being thrown, perhaps in spite of their best intentions, on the side of the bourgeoisie and reaction. Also wrong, therefore, was Trotsky’s underlying assumption concerning the special circumstances of a revolutionary period, since the coming to a head of the crisis clearly worked to exacerbate, not reduce, the existing differences within Russian Social Democracy.

But even if Trotsky’s statement about substitutionism had been expressly directed at the link between Bolshevik organizational methods and Stalinism proper, it would have remained a superficial and incorrect connection for the same reasons that the “continuity thesis,” chanted like a mantra for decades
by the Brahmins of Sovietology, was superficial and incorrect.\textsuperscript{8} Irving Howe, to his credit, correctly deflated the tendentious praise that is typically lavished on Trotsky’s remark: “One may doubt that it is quite so prescient as some historians have supposed . . . Trotsky’s remark does not, nor could it possibly be expected to, disclose the complex causes of that degeneration . . . through the workings of an exclusive cause, such as the Leninist doctrine of organization.”\textsuperscript{9} Trotsky himself of course eventually spent not an inconsiderable amount of time and effort explaining all the ways in which his earlier assessment of Lenin was incorrect and based on assumptions that were contradicted by the lessons of the Russian Revolution.\textsuperscript{10}

While this moment was a false start, crucial elements of Trotsky’s mature analysis of Stalinism were already present here, albeit in a superficial form. In criticizing Lenin, Trotsky in fact did evoke the prospect of a party reduced to an organization of mere functionaries and dominated by routine. In doing so, Trotsky referred for the first time to “bureaucratic centralism,” a concept that would later become an essential component of his understanding of Stalinism and that here made a merely casual appearance as an epithet condemning Lenin’s reorganization of the editorial board of the newspaper \textit{Iskra}. Trotsky also warned against the danger of the “Thermidorians.” In the same way, however, this danger referred to a possible conservative overreaction provoked by Lenin’s excess of centralism, where the party might fall into the hands of a tame and undesirable “socialist opportunist.” The analogy with the conservative turn of the French Revolution relied, in any case, on the disproportion between the cataclysmic demise of a successful revolutionary regime and the petty ambitions of Lenin as the would-be Robespierre of a fledgling party.\textsuperscript{11} Both bureaucratic centralism and the Thermidor analogy would reappear later on, infused with very different content, as they became important features of Trotsky’s mature analysis of Stalinism. But at this stage they were not developed and indeed could not have been developed, for the phenomenon they described had yet to arise.\textsuperscript{12}

In tracing Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinism, the correct starting point should instead be 1923. This year was significant because of the confluence of three crucial events. The first was Lenin’s illness, which effectively removed him from party work. His absence was important in part because Lenin had already identified bureaucratization, at least of a certain kind, as a definite problem within the party and the state, and had proposed specific measures against it. Lenin had also come to recognize some important personal as well as political weaknesses in Stalin, such as the fact that he had “concentrated immeasurable power in his hands,” and proposed his removal from the post
of general secretary. In both respects, Lenin had set into place the foundation for a struggle against what would eventually become Stalinism.

Lenin, however, did not quite perceive the full force and implications of the phenomenon, and probably not simply because it was still in its early developmental stages. Lenin’s diagnosis of bureaucracy tended to see it as a mere distortion, underestimating its potential danger and essential character. In fact it could be said that the cure against bureaucratization proposed by Lenin was a series of measures that were themselves of a bureaucratic character, such as the formation of a new party committee to rein in the supervisory institution controlled by Stalin. Indeed, in striking at Stalin in particular, in the absence of a fuller consideration of the bureaucratic danger, Lenin in many ways targeted the symptom, not the essence, of the problem. As I will explain, Trotsky’s diagnosis of the problem was more accurate, and the solution he proposed more suitable.

Lenin’s death in 1924 was also important because it confronted the party with the prospect of a ruinous struggle for succession. Lenin never possessed dictatorial powers within the party. On many occasions, he had to struggle mightily to persuade other leaders and the rank-and-file, as in the case of his April Theses in changing the political line of the party in 1917 or the signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty ending Russia’s participation in World War I. In fact, in some specific and far from unimportant instances, such as the timing and location of the October uprising, Lenin’s positions were politically defeated in the debates within the party. His political influence in the organization was nonetheless enormous, and his demise was bound to produce substantial difficulties. An intense fight at the top did in fact take place. The beginning of 1923 saw the formation of a semi-secret ruling “triumvirate” in the Politburo, composed of Stalin, Kamenev, and Zinoviev, and the first fierce attacks against Trotsky. Although the alignment of forces in the leadership would go through some important shifts after Lenin’s death, the basic contraposition between Stalin and Trotsky was already well entrenched by 1923. Beyond personal conflicts that no doubt existed and played a significant role, this contraposition assumed far broader proportions, becoming a sort of historical shorthand for a new, powerful reactionary regime and the Marxist forces that opposed it.

The second important event in 1923 was the full consolidation of the New Economic Policy (NEP). This new social and economic regime was a maneuver, a strategic retreat initiated by the Soviet state in 1921 in order to gain time for the international revolution and modulate the internal development of the USSR toward more moderate class relations. But the NEP also created specific dangers. By allowing the resurgence of market relations,
even under tightly controlled political conditions, the NEP entailed the danger of breathing new life into capitalistic and capitalist-oriented social forces, particularly in the countryside. By 1923, the rapid rise of the *kulak* and “nepmann” — the well-off peasant and the merchant — had proved this danger to be a real one. Members of these new and growing forces could find ways to leverage their social privileges and power within the political realm. Thus, it was possible that the *kulak* and “nepmann” would find resonance for their voice not just in the economy or the state apparatus, but also in the party itself.

Moreover, the NEP also entailed another round of sacrifices for the working class of the Soviet Union after years of revolution and civil war. The developmental priorities of the Soviet state were modulated in such a way as to impose very significant burdens on a class that was already weakened and embattled, and to consciously restrict its sociological and economic development. In this sense, the natural power base of the young workers’ state was by necessity politically constrained and saddled with enormous social responsibilities. The NEP thus created conditions in which the threat of capitalist restoration by military force represented by the Civil War was replaced by a threat of a different kind. This threat was less direct but more insidious, proceeding on two related tracks within both Soviet society and the party itself. The first was the creeping influences of the new capitalist social forces; the second was the dilution of the presence and strength of the working class.

Thus by 1923, two possible paths to the degeneration of the revolution and capitalist restoration were recognizably set into place: the bureaucratization of the state and party apparatuses, and the resurgence of capitalist forces in the economy and society. These paths were by no means mutually exclusive, and indeed in some ways could reinforce one another. By 1923, Trotsky had already identified both dangers with remarkable clarity and attempted to check them within the limits imposed by party loyalty and discipline. This method was made increasingly difficult by the fact that, as we will see, the Stalinist regime in its earliest stage of consolidation was already engaged in suppressing debate at all levels, some forms of administrative measures, and in shutting off the masses from policy decisions as well. Although supportive of the NEP’s strategic orientation, Trotsky insisted on the need to modulate it in a direction more favorable to the working class, as well as not to renounce the lever of class struggle by poor rural wage-laborers against the *kulaks* in the countryside.18

The third significant event of 1923 took place abroad: what would prove to be the last, and once again failed, revolutionary upsurge in Germany. This disaster in the international arena, like the others that followed,
helped legitimize the existing impulse within the revolutionary movement toward retreat, routine, and national self-satisfaction. In other words, it gave impetus to the existing tendencies that were beginning to propel Stalinism forward. The defeat in Germany was important, in addition, because in the context of mounting factional struggles at the top of the Russian party, it triggered the beginning of the bureaucratization of the Comintern itself, depriving it of independence and initiative. What became known at the time as the process of the Comintern’s “Bolshevization” was in fact the beginning of its Stalinization. This process consisted of a series of administrative changes initiated by Zinoviev in order to artificially elevate leaders regarded as trustworthy from the standpoint of the Russian factional struggles into positions of power, while at the same time providing the impression that reforms and corrections of what was evidently a mistaken policy were under way.

Prior to its defeat, the Communist Party of Germany had invited Trotsky to lead the revolutionary efforts. Trotsky had accepted enthusiastically, in part because he had already begun to breathe the unpleasant and insalubrious air in the Russian party, and in any case considered victory in Germany to be absolutely essential to the revolution—a notion foundational to the Bolshevik outlook under Lenin that the Stalinists would soon begin to cast aside.19 Zinoviev and Stalin, however, prohibited Trotsky from doing this. Trotsky’s presence in Germany of course provided no guarantees of a successful uprising, but this episode is indicative of the different orientation between Trotsky and his opponents on the international question.

These three events conspired to create the national and international conditions by which Stalinism could begin to emerge—manifesting itself as the suppression of intraparty democracy; the bureaucratization of civil, state, and, most pertinently, party life; and the reorientation of the USSR away from the international revolution. In none of these realms did Stalinism consolidate itself fully by 1923. The theory of “socialism in one country,” for example, had not even been proposed yet, and the administrative measures that were taken at that time were mild compared to what was to follow. Moreover, Stalinism at this stage necessarily lacked a proper name because the figure naturally associated with it, though no doubt beginning to tightening his grip on the party apparatus, remained somewhat in the shadows. Nevertheless, however tentative the beginning of Stalinism was, Trotsky had already identified the essential features of this phenomenon, was engaged in a probing analysis of its evolution, and led a determined opposition against its consolidation. Alone in the Politburo, but with an extensive following in the middle-level leadership and rank-and-file, Trotsky waged a fight against Stalinism across a wide front.
The most important political document in this fight is what came to be known as the “Declaration of the forty-six,” which was signed by many leading party figures in October 1923. The document contained a list of grievances and concrete proposals against many of the developments mentioned above—bureaucratization, the stifling of intraparty democracy, and the lack-advisical approach toward industrial development and the working class.

Although the declaration did not bear his signature, Trotsky was widely considered to be, at a minimum, the political inspirer of the criticism articulated in it. The appearance of this document earned Trotsky censure from the Central Committee, but also forced the leadership to allow a limited public discussion of the issues it raised. The widespread support for the positions laid out in the declaration resulted on the one hand in punitive demotions and dismissals, but on the other in the proclamation of a “New Course” that was supposed to usher in a renewal of democratic rights for party members and a determined fight against bureaucratization. This turned out to be a mere maneuver on the part of Stalinist leadership. But it also provided the opportunity for Trotsky to put forth and develop his analysis of the phenomenon. The most important document encapsulating this analysis is a remarkable series of articles that appeared in Pravda. This was later published as a pamphlet titled The New Course.

It is here that Trotsky sharpened Lenin’s critique of bureaucratization. Trotsky recognized “bureaucratization” as a pressing problem, but more than that as a deeper, more entrenched phenomenon that “bear[s] within it a danger of degeneration.” The stakes, in other words, were high, and the fight against bureaucratization was one of the crucial fronts on which the revolution could be won or lost. Moreover, Trotsky criticized not just “bureaucratization” as an unfortunate defect, but “bureaucratism”—a “definite system of administration of men and things.” Bureaucratization was an incipient and accelerating tendency, but bureaucratism was a system that was already into place. The fact that the phenomenon had a systemic character meant that in its essence and reality it exceeded the mere sum of the incorrect individual attitudes on the part of those in positions of power. It was not just “the aggregate of the bad habits of office holders.” It was not, moreover, just the lingering residue of certain habits inherited from tsarism or from the reality of the Civil War, but a new, looming danger created by the unfavorable national and international conjuncture in which the Bolsheviks found themselves.

Thus bureaucratism appeared from one angle to be a passive outcome, in that it was the product of objective difficulties. But it also had an active and human side, in what Trotsky described as those “comrades [who] in all
sincerity, did not notice the bureaucratic danger they themselves represent.\textsuperscript{25} As an active force endowed with a subjective will and its own peculiar interests and power base, bureaucratism constantly threatened to entrench and multiply the existing “objective” difficulties. It is at this point that bureaucratism intersected with the factional struggles at the top, and Trotsky, while maintaining party loyalty and discipline, was not shy about exposing and combating the danger.

An increasingly privileged bureaucracy was in the process of developing a definite political self-consciousness and unified outlook. Its watchwords were stability, order, routine, and mistrust of adventures at home or abroad. Stalin was intimately connected to these layers in an institutional sense. He felt their mood and articulated their interests most keenly. But at this stage Stalin was only one part of a broader leadership faction steering the country toward a dangerous course. There were others in the same leading political bloc whose institutional connections were not in the party apparatus but at the juncture between the state apparatus and the economic sphere.\textsuperscript{26} Responding to a different sort of pressure flowing from the social situation created by the NEP, this layer began to interpret it as more than a mere necessary maneuver, discouraged a serious and planned approach to industrial development, and even began to titillate the predictable instincts of the \textit{kulak} and “nepman.” Bukharin, who was on his way to become the most important figure associated with this right-wing of the party, would soon openly encourage the capitalistic byproduct of the NEP, blurring out his famous exhortation to “get rich!”\textsuperscript{27} Although they arrived at these political conclusions through a different path than Stalin, this other section of the leadership also stood for similar watchwords.

Collectively, this group was well versed in Marxist theory, possessed a tremendous reservoir of practical experience, and, in spite of individual mistakes, had contributed powerfully to the making of the revolution. When Trotsky began to fight this active, human element of bureaucratism, he hoped to be able to correct the problem through the sort of loyal, honest, and fierce intraparty discussions that had worked remarkably well in the past few years. He understood and boldly warned his comrades, however, that their qualities were far from an absolute guarantee against degeneration. Trotsky reminded them that the leaders of the Second International once also constituted a leadership with impressive credentials and genuine qualities forged by real class struggle and direct collaboration with Marx and Engels.\textsuperscript{28} Unable to resist powerful political and social undercurrents, they had nevertheless degenerated, ultimately coming to the rescue of their respective national imperialisms.
Trotsky’s struggle against bureaucratism was multifaceted. Its first and most important aspect was the fight for the revitalization of the masses—for their integration and reintegration into the everyday administration of the economy, state, and party. This revitalization was predicated in part on the public (and if possible official) condemnation of the danger of bureaucratism: the role and rule of unchecked functionaries. This move identified the danger confronting Soviet society as clearly and openly as possible. Trotsky and the Left Opposition accomplished this by winning an official condemnation of “bureaucratism.”29 This measure by itself of course could not suffice, for the same reasons that the initiative against bureaucratism proposed by Lenin could not. But it certainly opened up political space and provided cover for a struggle from below against bureaucratic privilege. On this score, Trotsky counted on and attempted to stimulate the energy of the youth as the natural opponent of a self-satisfied old guard, and put to use his considerable powers of persuasion to energize them.30 To facilitate this struggle, Trotsky pushed for other institutional reforms as well, which were aimed at checking the growth of bureaucratism. He opposed, for example, the permanent consolidation of appointments, rather than elections, as the system used to fill governmental positions of power.31

A related element of Trotsky’s critique of bureaucratism was his insistence on a planned economy. This was to take place within the basic parameters of the NEP social regime and eventually replace it.32 This controversy involved several complex questions, some of which appeared to be of a technical nature—what the proper role of the Gosplan (State Planning Commission) should be, whether the development of the Soviet economy was to unfold under the aegis of industry or finance, which monetary policy was best suited to the harmonization of the peasant and industrial sectors of the economy, and so on. But at bottom this was not a desiccated matter of formulating a correct state policy and political economy. At stake here was the social development of the Soviet Union, and thus the basic terrain on which the party would have to chart its political course. This terrain could be more or less favorable in accordance to the specific weight of various classes and the general success of economic development. From this standpoint, Trotsky’s insistence on planning and his emphasis on industrial development were in part a matter of literally producing more workers so as to increase the social weight of the working class in the Soviet Union and in the party.33

More than that, however, the significance of his conception of economic planning was another avenue through which the political revitalization of the working class could be accomplished. Trotsky understood the move toward the creation of a planned economy not just as a necessary one
from the standpoint of the correct development of the Soviet economy, but also as an occasion to draw the urban masses more systematically and consciously into the industrial economy in a way that took advantage of their needs, energy, and initiative, without simultaneously destroying their hegemonic relations with the peasantry. It was an opportunity to revitalize the working class by drawing it into the practical work of its own sociological and economic development, providing it with an opportunity to grow in more than a merely quantitative sense, to renew itself “spiritually” after years of tremendous difficulties and exhaustion, and begin to shake off the stifling rule of the functionaries. Trotsky’s attack against bureaucratism was in fact fundamentally directed against passivity—against the idea of attaining socialism on automatic pilot, based not on the revolutionary vigor of the masses, but on the top-down direction of an insulated leadership. In this sense, Trotsky’s insistence on planning and industrial development was intimately connected to the democratic question, which was an additional aspect of his fight against bureaucratism.34

Trotsky’s insistence on democratization was focused on the conditions inside the party. He tirelessly fought to open up more democratic space within it. He insisted that far greater freedom should be allowed at the base and that the lower ranks of the party should have freedom of discussion and criticism in accordance to the best traditions of Lenin’s democratic centralism. Once again, this was not a matter of the correct calibration of official policy imposed from above, or a technical matter of enforcing statutes and rules. Trotsky’s pressure on the levers of official policy, such as the official condemnation of bureaucratism, was intended to create the conditions most suitable for the existing propulsive energies from below to come into play. Having been forced into concessions, the bureaucracy immediately attempted to channel these energies harmlessly through the official conduits that were under their control.35 Thus on the question of party life and conduct, having officially recognized a generalized malaise and discomfort, the bureaucracy began to interpret the turn to the “new course” as merely the need for a more thorough ideological preparation of party members. Trotsky attacked this approach as “pedagogical”—an attempt to “transform the youth into the passive material of education” that reflected the mentality of the bureaucratic functionary.36 In any case, rather than affect the democratization and revitalization of party life, this approach was likely to have the opposite effect.37

An important aspect of the question of intraparty democracy was what to do about the existing ban on factions. This ban had been passed as a temporary measure under difficult circumstances in 1921. It had no doubt contributed to a deadening of the internal life of the party and put
many institutional weapons in the hands of Stalin as the head of the central party apparatus. Trotsky’s position on this question remained ambiguous. While he did not personally call for its repeal, the declaration of the forty-six, which in most other ways echoed his outlook and proposals, did. At this stage, Trotsky, still working within the avenues available to him in the party, had to be strategic about when and where to press. Engaged in a very delicate diplomatic process in the Politburo, he chose not to call for the repeal of the ban on factions, perhaps letting others make the point for him.

The article “Groups and Fractional Formations,” which is part of The New Course, illustrates Trotsky’s ambiguity on this score. On one hand, Trotsky formally insisted on the undesirability of factions and did not call for the repeal of the ban. The thrust of Trotsky’s intervention, however, went in the opposite direction. He tactfully explained that the ban by itself was no guarantee to solving the underlying problems faced by the party, particularly in the absence of a patient and tolerant attitude on the part of the leadership. In fact, Trotsky’s review of the salient episodes in the party’s history proved that the sharpest factional disagreements had been successfully resolved in the absence of the ban against factions. It was abundantly clear that the general principle of Trotsky’s critique was advocating the democratization of the party. He characterized the party under the regime of bureaucratism as “living . . . on two stories: the upper storey, where things are decided, and the lower storey, where all you do is learn of the decisions.” Against this model Trotsky counterpoised the ideal and memory of the party as “a democratic organization, that is, a collectivity which decides upon its road by the thought and the will of all its members.” Without a vibrant and active internal democracy, the party effectively lost its “principal superiority, its multiple collective experience”—the real guarantee of its survival and effective leadership.

Trotsky’s early critique of bureaucratism also applied, in essence, to his appraisal of the international situation and role of the Comintern. While there was nothing in The New Course addressing this question directly, after the revolutionary developments in Germany came to a head in 1923, Trotsky was to readily extend his critique to this sphere as well. Thus the methods of the Stalinized Comintern were criticized by Trotsky not just as ineffective—and as they led from to one disaster to another, they certainly were—but for their profoundly bureaucratic character as well. The “Bolshevization” of this institution set a disastrous precedent that would be replicated at every turn, after every mistake, establishing an institutional culture in which Moscow dominated the conduct of other national parties by administrative fiat. The sorry spectacle created by this revolving door of cronies and scapegoats did
little to inspire international confidence in the institution and gave some legitimacy to the predictable attempt on the part of capitalist forces to paint “communism” as the ill-concealed tool of Russian foreign policy interests.

Trotsky would have more to say about this phenomenon later, particularly in the 1929 work *The Third International after Lenin*. But at this stage, he already clearly understood and opposed the bureaucratic character of the problem. For example, in the aftermath of the German defeat, Trotsky, while quite critical of the leader Heinrich Brandler, protested against his removal and the sweeping changes Moscow imposed on the Central Committee of the German Communist Party. He did so on the grounds that regardless of the relative weaknesses and immaturity of the existing leadership, such administrative removals would establish a far more ruinous precedent for bureaucratic privilege. The Comintern would be transformed into a mere appendage of Moscow’s will, preventing the genuine development of each national party and of the international organization as a whole.

Finally, the same impulse toward working class revitalization and democracy characteristic of *The New Course* was also at work on a different register. This was Trotsky’s attack on incipient “Leninism,” the formalist and doctrinaire body of thought concocted by Stalinism in the process of its formation. By 1923, the question of the content and standing of Lenin’s legacy was very much in the air because of his medical condition. The “old Bolsheviks”—that is, the triumvirate of Stalin, Kamenev, and Zinoviev and the underbrush of lesser leaders and bureaucrats affiliated with them—rushed to drape themselves with the mantle of Lenin’s inheritance. They began to construct a particular kind of “Leninism” that was in good measure the ideological manifestation of what Trotsky called “conservative traditionalism”—the inclination to suspend critical thinking and fall back on readily available formulas from the successes and authority of the past. Trotsky detected in this approach an instance of “ideological petrification.” He explained that to preserve a certain formal correspondence at the expense of its essential content was to miss the real significance of Lenin’s inheritance. Once again here lurked a terrible danger of degeneration: “If there is one thing likely to strike a mortal blow to the spiritual life of the party . . . it is . . . the transformation of Leninism from a method demanding for its application initiative, critical thinking and ideological courage into a canon which demands nothing more than interpreters appointed for good and aye.”

Trotsky argued that Lenin’s inheritance should not be understood primarily as a finished body of readily available texts, but as a flexible approach to political life in all its evolving complexities. The point was not “that Leninism signifies that ‘anything goes,’” or to reject altogether the claim and
allegiance to a specific tradition.\textsuperscript{50} It was nonetheless necessary to understand that the essence of the “Leninist” tradition rested not in this or that postulate, valid in perpetuity, but on the capacity to maintain maximum flexibility, to learn the political art of “carry[ing] out an abrupt turn,” and to preserve a difficult, constant orientation of theory toward the unfolding of actual events and new problems.\textsuperscript{51} Trotsky rejected the notion of tradition as a lifeless shibboleth, the trump card to be played in order to prevail in party controversies, or the self-contained doctrine to be transmitted mechanically across generations and down hierarchies. He argued instead that, “Tradition is not a rigid canon nor an official manual; it cannot be learned by heart nor accepted as gospel . . . On the contrary, the tradition must, so to speak, be conquered by internal travail; it must be worked out by oneself in a critical manner, and in that way assimilated.”\textsuperscript{52}

Thus Lenin’s “method” should not be reduced to a series of formulas, because, whether of a conjunctural or epochal character, these were always intimately connected to a tissue of living reality that was bound to change.\textsuperscript{53} Trotsky reminded the party, moreover, that the entire history of Bolshevism, particularly after the Russian Revolution, was characterized by its capacity to actively adapt to this living reality: “Neither October, nor Brest-Litovsk, nor the creation of a regular peasant army, nor the system of requisitioning food products, nor the NEP, nor the State Planning Commission were or could have been foreseen or predetermined by . . . Bolshevism.”\textsuperscript{54} In virtually every occasion, Lenin himself, in attempting to steer the party to a necessary abrupt turn, had to struggle against an already encrusted tradition and conservative resistance in order to escape “the empty husk of a period just left behind.”\textsuperscript{55}

Of course, because of the nature of political life, particularly in a time of crisis, inflexible dogmatism was bound to transform itself into eclecticism as the political ground shifted under it. In this sense, at the level of doctrine Stalinism would soon display tremendous flexibility—although not the kind prized by Trotsky—using quotations from Lenin as mere ideological cover for every twist and turn, even when the thrust of the policy went flamboyantly beyond the pale of policies enacted under Lenin’s leadership.\textsuperscript{56} This would soon be proved by the very appearance of the doctrine of “socialism in one country” in party debates, which was justified by a haphazard collection of quotations from Lenin. In any case, before these developments were to take place, Trotsky had already identified another important manifestation of bureaucratism. The most general impulse that characterized \textit{The New Course} was the desire to rekindle the revolutionary fire of the October Revolution. Trotsky did not attempt to do this by demanding ultraleft adventures on all fronts irrespective of the objective situation or by mystical
appeals for deliverance to a revolutionary “spirit.” Instead, he fought for a series of concrete reforms and initiatives that he believed would maximize the healthy social and political energies still available in spite of the difficult conjuncture and ongoing degeneration. *The New Course*’s critique of the incipient “Leninist” orthodoxy followed this general outline, once again providing an early warning for a pattern of degeneration that was soon to unfold, as well as a political opposition against it.

Having examined this important text and the specific political orientation of Trotsky toward the evolving situation in the revolutionary movement, it is now necessary to give further consideration to the character of his political opposition to incipient Stalinism. Even conceding that Trotsky’s analysis of the processes of degeneration was incisive and that he did put up a kind of opposition, it is still necessary to ask whether it is legitimate to speak of his historical complicity with Stalinism. I had already argued that this sort of political judgment was necessary in understanding Gramsci and his legacy. My conclusion in that case was that Gramsci’s relation to Stalinism was ambiguous, hardly constituting an inspiring historical example of vigorous opposition to it. At the time of Gramsci’s arrest, his understanding of the events taking place in the Soviet Union was far from adequate. He underestimated the dangers involved and simply did not develop a sophisticated analysis of the nature of the political processes driving the intraparty conflict. Only later (while in prison) was Gramsci able to step back, reflect, and capture some of the essential elements of the degeneration. But his behavior while he was still free and politically active can be called oppositional only in the weakest sense of the word.

None of this can be said in Trotsky’s case. And if ever a case could be made for Trotsky’s complicity with Stalinism, it would be exactly at this stage, when he still shared the same social privileges and operated in the same political institutions as the Stalinists did, in important ways submitting to the kind of loyal discipline required by them. But it is not necessary to wait for Trotsky’s expulsion from the Stalinized party to confirm the fundamental and principled character of his opposition to the ongoing reaction. I have attempted to show that Trotsky understood the processes at work remarkably well. His political opposition was not the accidental result of disorientation—he did not stumble upon it while groping in the dark against mysterious forces. It was instead a conscious, carefully aimed intervention against a process of which he had already grasped the essential qualities. More importantly, the magnitude and significance of Trotsky’s opposition is powerfully confirmed by the fact that it was itself the very pivot around which reaction was turning. All of the measures being undertaken by the
proponents of Stalinism in the process of its consolidation—the “Bolshevization” of the Comintern, the suffocation of intraparty democracy, the beginning of recantations, the codification of a doctrinaire “Leninist” orthodoxy, the entire multifaceted erosion of the revolution—were done under the aegis of a struggle against Trotsky.

This is extraordinarily significant, but not because it suggests that Trotsky incarnated some essential revolutionary qualities in a religious sense. Trotsky did reflect and give the sharpest expression (for reasons that no doubt bear some relation to his personal qualities) to the remaining healthy elements of the Russian Revolution—the energy of the masses and the youth, the internationalist impulse, and Bolshevism as a fighting and thinking tradition. That these energies were ultimately snuffed out, and that Trotsky’s attempt to capitalize on them was not successful, is not decisive if the point is to demonstrate that Trotsky’s opposition was principled and real. Neither is the fact that Trotsky conducted the struggle from within the same organization. If it is accepted that the Bolshevik party was undergoing a fundamental transformation and becoming infused with a completely different social and political content, then Trotsky’s opposition from within the ranks of the same party is no evidence of complicity. Since the organization could function and had functioned otherwise, accomplishing something of world-historical significance in the process, a determined defense of it from internal degeneration was a natural and reasonable course. There was no politically suitable “outside” from which to wage this struggle. The comfortable purity of petty-bourgeois detachment in this sense was no alternative—certainly not for Trotsky, who was not suited to play the role of the outraged spectator.

To pursue the matter of the character of Trotsky’s opposition more thoroughly and round out the review of the political development of the period being discussed here, it is necessary to further examine Trotsky’s conduct leading up to the May 1924 party congress, which marked his first and important defeat. In focusing on the question of Trotsky’s relationship with the party and his submission to its discipline, two important statements by Trotsky should be examined. He made the first statement in an open letter to the party written on December 8, 1923. This letter was the capstone of Trotsky’s critique of bureaucratism and became part of *The New Course* pamphlet. The second was a speech given to the Thirteenth Party Congress, when a defeated Trotsky affirmed his loyalty to the party.

In addition, I will discuss Trotsky’s political conduct with respect to the two weapons he had at his disposal in his struggle against the triumvirs. The first was Lenin’s proposal to remove Stalin from the post of general secretary. The second was the possibility of uprooting Stalinism by force, making
use of Trotsky’s considerable power in the military sector. In both instances, Trotsky chose not to employ a potentially decisive weapon that was available to him. Because of this, both cases are sometimes depicted as missed opportunities that illustrate Trotsky’s lack of realism and even his political ineptitude. I will suggest, on the contrary, that his conduct in these episodes illustrates the depth of his understanding of incipient Stalinism and the maturity of his political opposition.

Trotsky’s December 1923 letter to the party was the most open and direct culmination of his attack against bureaucratism. As an open letter, it was consciously directed not just at the leadership, but at the rank and file as well. This was consistent with Trotsky’s general aim to combat bureaucratism by helping activate energies from below. Debated first at the level of the party cells, the letter had an electrifying effect throughout the nation. For some, it acted as the catalyst that powerfully expressed the unease they were experiencing with the increasing suffocation of party life. Its portrayal of the deterioration of the party and of the extreme danger involved, however, did not suit the mood of many others. They had enough of crises and dangers, and more or less instinctively demanded at least the appearance of stability and a breathing spell, which they readily found in the status quo and the routines of the apparatus.

In any case, a full and genuine internal debate was not allowed to take place. The bureaucracy, in combination with the Stalinist leadership, understood the danger and took measures that were consonant with its outlook and way of operating. While the Stalinist leadership was not yet in a position to completely suppress the debate at this stage, it was very much in control of all of the formal and informal mechanisms by which this debate could proceed institutionally up the party hierarchy and toward the next congress. The official party press, for example, sought out and amplified the interventions made by those who were alarmed by and hostile to the sentiments expressed by Trotsky and launched its own editorial campaign of vilification. The publication of The New Course as a pamphlet was delayed so that it would not reach the rank and file before the congress. In spite of this, the support Trotsky’s letter received in the debates within party cells was very significant. But as the debates moved from the mass level to the intermediate, and then to higher bodies of the party, this support was systematically filtered out though the mechanisms of the bureaucracy. Its ability to control the timing and conditions of the debates—to delay, truncate, confuse and muddle them up whenever necessary—deflated the initial enthusiasm around Trotsky’s ideas and prevented them from finding much of an institutional correspondence. As the debate moved to the higher level
of this process, moreover, the bureaucracy was also able to manipulate the selection of various delegates.\textsuperscript{61}

The army of functionaries mobilized against Trotsky, of course, needed little encouragement from the top in order to conduct this campaign. They were the social and administrative group identified by Trotsky as the engine of bureaucratism. By the time of the January 1924 party conference, which was held in preparation for the official congress in May, these functionaries had already exerted their power so that support for Trotsky’s position had been significantly whittled down. At that time, Trotsky and the forty-six were officially branded as a “petty-bourgeois deviation” from Leninism, linking the struggle within the party to its ideological petrification.

After the conference, the news of Lenin’s death charged the ongoing debate with additional political and emotional significance. The stakes of the struggle were increased by the fact that shortly before the convocation of the congress, the party’s Central Committee met to read and discuss Lenin’s testament. Lenin’s unexpected proposal to remove Stalin from the post of general secretary sent the triumvirs into a state of panic. Zinoviev rushed in support of Stalin and proposed to not divulge Lenin’s document. In spite of these efforts, Trotsky now had at his disposal a tremendous weapon in the fight with the triumvirate, particularly against Stalin.\textsuperscript{62} However, he remained silent, refusing to press the matter.

In spite of Trotsky’s restraint, the conflict became even more intense after this episode. The triumvirs chose to press on with their attack. A few days later, as the Thirteenth Party Congress opened, they had managed to completely stack the deck in their favor, securing overwhelming support from the participating delegates. The denunciations of Trotsky would now reach a new level. Zinoviev was the one who led the attack. In his intervention, he insisted on the need for the party to be “monolithic” and went as far as to demand Trotsky’s expulsion and even his arrest.\textsuperscript{63} He then demanded not simply that Trotsky submit to party discipline in the face of the will of the majority, but offer a full recantation as well. By itself, this was a significant measure of the party’s degeneration.\textsuperscript{64} Trotsky was now confronted with another difficult decision.

This is the political context in which the two statements Trotsky made to defend his loyalty to the party and at the same time justify his opposition should be discussed. While the December letter did not spare criticism of bureaucratism, it remained within the parameters of party loyalty, particularly because the “new course” had at least formally recognized this danger. The letter was not a proposal to remove a specific group of people by administrative fiat. Nor was it a statement about the fully accomplished
degeneration of the party. Trotsky’s perspective was that the party could and should be significantly reformed. Democratic centralism, as elaborated and practiced by the Bolsheviks, meant full freedom of discussion and criticism, particularly leading up to a new congress in which party policy could be debated and changed. Though Bolshevism demanded full obedience once decisions had been made at a congress, it also required periodic, democratic debate and competition among contending visions of what the proper policies should be. Whether such competing groups should be allowed to harden into stable factions was a secondary question. What was crucial was that the party remain a thinking institution. Trotsky’s letter was in line with this tradition. At its rhetorical apex, the document stated that

A Bolshevik is not merely a disciplined man; he is a man who in each case and on each question forges a firm opinion of his own and defends it courageously and independently, not only against his enemies, but inside his own party. Today, perhaps, he will be in the minority in his organization. He will submit, because it is his party. But this does not always signify that he is in the wrong. Perhaps he saw or understood before the others did a new task or the necessity of a turn. He will persistently raise the question a second, a third, a tenth time, if need be. Thereby he will render his party a service, helping it meet the new task fully armed or carry out the necessary turn without organic upheavals, without factional convulsions.

This first statement of Trotsky’s loyalty to the party is an eminently reasonable and principled one. The tradition of democratic centralism had functioned successfully for years. The party had won a remarkable, world-historical victory against an international array of powerful reactionary forces. It had made a revolution and won a civil war. Trotsky was obliged to assume that it could still function even under increasingly difficult and troubling circumstances. The task was therefore to loyally and persistently attempt to correct and reorient this institution. The undercurrents at work pushing the Soviet Union and the party in a dangerous direction were powerful, and Trotsky understood their magnitude and direction clearly. It was therefore also necessary to remain alert and critical, to continue to go against the current in a time of retrenchment and reaction. It was clear that the political behavior of many in the leadership was profoundly troubling and was likely to thrust them further along toward new and worse forms of accommodation and betrayal. But it could not be assumed that these currents had already induced a sudden and irrevocable transformation throughout a wide layer of
hitherto committed revolutionaries. This was no doubt a possibility, but one had to allow these leaders an opportunity to correct their course. The question at bottom was of course not one of psychological attachment to people, traditions, or institutions, but of political prospects. When posed in this way, there was at least one tangible proof that the party remained a viable institution, potentially capable of reform and worth fighting for: many within it agreed with Trotsky, recognized the same danger, and were determined to put their political life on the line to prevent it.

By the time of the Thirteenth Party Congress, however, the process of degeneration had advanced significantly. Trotsky had an opportunity to reassess his position after having seen his political restraint on the question of Lenin’s testament rewarded with more abuse and having been defeated in an unequal struggle not on the grounds of a free exchange of ideas, but due to bureaucratic machinations. As already mentioned, the climax of this situation was reached in a highly charged atmosphere when Zinoviev demanded from Trotsky a recantation of his views. At the congress, Trotsky’s speech included an obvious acknowledgement of his defeat. But he framed it in very specific terms:

Nothing could be simpler or easier, morally and politically, than to admit before one’s own party that one has erred . . . No great moral heroism is needed for that . . . Comrades, none of us wishes to be or can be right against the party. In the last instance the party is always right, because it is the only historic instrument which the working class possesses for the solution of its fundamental tasks. I have said already that nothing would be easier than to say before the party that all these criticisms and all these declarations, warnings, and protests were mistaken from beginning to end. I cannot say so, however, because, comrades, I do not think so. I know that one ought not to be right against the party. One can be right only with the party because history has not created any other way for the realization of one’s rightness. The English have the saying ‘My country, right or wrong.’ With much greater justification we can say: My party, right or wrong—wrong on certain partial, specific issues or at certain moments . . . It would be ridiculous perhaps, almost indecent, to make my personal statements here, but I do hope that in case of need I shall not prove the meanest soldier on the meanest of Bolshevik barricades.67

More so than the first statement, it might be tempting to read these lines skeptically, inferring Trotsky’s fundamental complicity with Stalinism and arguing that he should have made a more radical break with it at this
stage. It is true that Trotsky was fighting to uphold a tradition that was in the process of being decisively overturned. But the only standpoint from which this fight could be waged at this stage was from within the party. To think of the matter otherwise is to adopt an outlook that was alien to Trotsky and peculiar in its own right. The perennial outsiders of politics, the professorial and professional cynics, will no doubt find it irresistible to criticize Trotsky on this point—he would later have to deal with an overabundance of such types while attempting to build a movement in the United States. A similar demand could be raised, slightly more seriously, from the standpoint of the same ultraleft orientation that before the Russian Revolution had found refuge in the purity of revolutionary principles rather than immerse itself in political work, and at this stage demanded the same course once again. But this was not a question of maintaining one's political hygiene in the face of a debasing degeneration. It was a question of saving the revolution and its accomplishments, the foundations of which were still very much in place. At this point, even after the triumvirs had dragged the party through the mud, the situation had not fundamentally changed. Around ten years later, looking back, Trotsky recognized this period, and probably this very moment, as the onset of “Thermidorian” reaction. But this did not imply regrets about his conduct or a reassessment of his own behavior at the time. No other conduct what feasible at this point. This is not to say that the Stalinist degeneration was inevitable—only that Trotsky had to fight it in the only possible and politically responsible way and let the outcome play itself out.68

It is true that with his statement Trotsky conceded much. He submitted himself to the political will of the congress, which he knew to be mistaken and dangerous. But the statement refused to concede much more. Trotsky insisted on the need for and the right to critical thinking even when the tensions and the threats had begun to reach critical levels. He refused to surrender his political conscience and his intellectual faculties. This was not just the assertion of a wounded individuality, but of a historical rightness that had to exhaust all avenues within the same institutional aegis before it could legitimately look for new ones. In his history of the events of 1917, Trotsky wrote that in order to succeed, the revolution had been forced to “crawl under the belly of a Cossack’s horse.”69 Preserving and extending it would require similarly creative avenues.

By choosing this course, Trotsky failed to satisfy—then as well as later in the eyes of commentators—not only the petty-bourgeois democrat and ultraleft sensibilities, but a different kind of crowd as well. This was demonstrated by the outraged reaction of the Stalinized congress delegates. Those
who came to interpret the defense of the revolution as groveling before a mummified orthodoxy, the automatic continuation of routine, and blind obedience to an ever-shrinking and all-knowing leadership without which everything would be lost could not be satisfied with this statement. Those who possessed this outlook, or were possessed by it, along with many more careerists within the apparatus who were simply ready to hitch their cart to the train of any victorious faction, could not help but be dissatisfied. For such types, “nothing could be simpler or easier,” than to go along with the drift of reaction. By refusing to give the recantation demanded by Zinoviev, Trotsky was indeed making things difficult for them. The score would have to be settled later on. But at this stage, Trotsky was already engaged in a politically and psychologically dangerous high-wire act between capitulation to the degeneration of Marxism and the complete abandonment of it.

In walking this difficult path during this period, Trotsky had at his disposal two potentially devastating weapons. The first, already mentioned, was to insist on the implementation of the part of Lenin’s testament calling for Stalin’s removal. The second was even more radical. The triumvirs controlled a vast array of forces—including the state and party apparatus, the Comintern, and the trade unions. Trotsky’s institutional power base, however, had he been willing to use it, was potentially decisive—the armed forces.

As the organizer of the Red Army and victorious commander during the Civil War, Trotsky had an evident advantage on this particular institutional front. It is also evident that for some time during the factional struggle, probably as late as January of 1925 when Trotsky was finally removed from the Revolutionary War Council which he presided, he could have prevailed by means of a military coup. The triumvirs were certainly busy spreading this rumor, painting their own picture of the threat of degeneration, headed by Trotsky in Napoleonic fashion. But Trotsky refused to do so, and there is no evidence that he ever actually considered it.

Both instances are sometimes presented as missed opportunities—proof of Trotsky’s naiveté and lack of political realism. In fact, a case can be made that in both instances his inaction should be considered a measure of his political maturity and of the profundity of his understanding of Stalinism. Lenin’s testament had proposed to remove Stalin from the increasingly powerful post of general secretary and possibly more than that. Getting rid of Stalin, by any means necessary, might have had a positive short-term effect. But in all likelihood, it would have proven to be counterproductive in the long run. Undertaken by administrative means this action would have merely mirrored the actual conduct of the triumvir. As such, and especially from the standpoint of Trotsky’s critique of bureaucratism, it would hardly
have served as a constructive example of the sort of measures and initiatives necessary to reform and reorient the party.

This was a question of revolutionary ethics. But even in a purely instrumental sense, this action would not have been decisive. At the time, Stalin was only one component of incipient Stalinism. The phenomenon is rightly named after this particular individual because the unfolding of events proved the latter to be the most representative and important agent of the former. But Trotsky was fighting a system, not just a person. The deeper undercurrent moving the Soviet Union toward degeneration would not have ceased to assert itself simply because of the removal on one man. Moreover, Stalin at that time was only one of many leaders within the party who were steering the Soviet Union toward dangerous waters. Particularly at this stage, “Stalinism” as a system could have managed very well without Stalin. The problem of eliminating Stalinism, wrote Trotsky much later, “is not a question of substituting one ruling clique for another.”

The same logic holds with respect to the military coup, and is in fact amplified in this case. Had Trotsky pursued his military option successfully, it is likely that the processes of degeneration would have accelerated as a result. The revitalization of the masses would have been pushed back further by this even more radical and arbitrary act at the top of the state and the party. This Napoleonic “solution” could only have accelerated the tendencies toward automatism, unchecked hierarchy and privilege that had been identified by Trotsky, though it no doubt would have put a different personal stamp on them. As his proposals on the question of the militarization of trade unions had proven earlier, Trotsky himself was not completely removed from the powerful negative currents affecting the party. In this Napoleonic scenario, he would have simply become the perpetrator of Stalinism itself—in condensed form and under a different name. The fact that Trotsky did not give this strategy serious consideration testifies to the principled character of his opposition as well as his clear grasp of the phenomenon he was struggling against.

II. THE VICTORY AND CONSOLIDATION OF STALINISM

The domination of the bureaucracy over the country, as well as Stalin’s domination over the bureaucracy, have well-nigh attained their absolute consummation. But what conclusions would follow from this? There are some who say that since the actual state that has emerged from the proletarian revolution does not correspond to ideal a priori norms, therefore they turn their backs on it. This is political snobbery, common to pacifist-democratic, libertarian, anarcho-syndicalist and, generally, ultraleft circles of petty-bourgeois intelligentsia. There are
others who say that since this state has emerged from the proletarian revolution, therefore every criticism of it is sacrilege and counterrevolution. That is the voice of hypocrisy behind which lurk most often the immediate material interests of certain groups among this very same petty-bourgeois intelligentsia or among the workers’ bureaucracy. These two types—the political snob and the political hypocrite—are readily interchangeable, depending upon personal circumstances. Let us pass them both by.74

The Thirteenth Party Congress sanctioned the de facto demise of the new course and Trotsky’s personal defeat. The bureaucratist backlash that ensued meant that many previously legal venues of struggle against the majority had been closed off once and for all. The political space available to Trotsky and the opposition that had coalesced around him had become severely restricted. But it had not been erased. And while Trotsky by necessity softened the tone of his criticism, he also dramatically widened its front. He intervened against the falsification of the history of the Russian Revolution,75 the theory of socialism in one country, multifarious mistakes in the policy of the Comintern, and the Stalinist leadership’s exhortation to the kulaks to “get rich.” Trotsky also intervened in matters that were somewhat removed from the center of the controversy. He challenged the consolidation of Stalinism in the matters of art, culture, and education. He attacked the concept of “proletarian art” and the monopolization of artistic development and production by the official proletkult organization.76 He fought the imposition of a scientific orthodoxy in general, and came to the defense of the Soviet adherents to Freudian psychoanalysis in particular.77 He intervened on questions of family life, workers’ culture, and education.78 In all these debates, Trotsky defended independent thought and initiative against impositions from above, against the “hasty intolerance” of the leader and of the functionary.79 In these matters as in others, he tried to prevent an iron curtain from descending upon the Soviet mind. Further administrative measures against Trotsky were unable to check his critical omnipresence. In 1925, for instance, when a further demotion attempted to bury him in a subordinate position dealing with the complex work of economic development, Trotsky mastered the technical and administrative problems involved, and re-emerged from them onto the political scene, using his newly found expertise as a weapon to supplement and press his argument for a planned economy.80

But this conflict could not be displaced and renewed indefinitely. On one side, the process of consolidation of Stalinism was accelerating on all fronts—the formulation of socialism in one country and its enshrinement as official theory, the further erosion of party life, and the increasing isolation of the
The defeat of the opposition and the consolidation of Stalinism brought this period to a close. The endgame can be traced by following the series of events that marked the decline of Trotsky’s opposition and the rise of Stalinism. The opposition’s efforts to reach the masses and draw them into the conflict were met with administrative and police measures. The GPU was present either to intimidate or to violently suppress the proceedings.

Although not characterized by an insurrectionist outlook, the opposition found itself in the streets quite frequently during this period, consciously looking for or stumbling into such contact: the June 1927 demonstration at the Yaroslav station on the occasion of the administrative exile of the Left Oppositionist Ivar Smilga; the October 1927 official parade when the Leningrad workers rallied toward Trotsky’s separate station instead of the official stand seating the Stalinist leadership; the November 1927 sortie on the part of the Joint Opposition with an open appeal to the masses in the streets, marching separately with their own slogans on the tenth anniversary of the revolution; and again in November 1927 at the funeral of the Left Oppositionist Adolph Yoffe, who had committed suicide as an act of protest against Trotsky’s expulsion.

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of measures taken against Trotsky. He was removed from the Politburo in October 1926, from the Comintern executive in September 1927, expelled from the party in November 1927, sent to internal exile in January 1928, and finally expelled from the Soviet Union in January 1929. Against this spiraling repression, the difficulty of Trotsky’s high-wire act should be underscored. Under the same pressures Zinoviev, Kamenev, and many of their followers quickly capitulated to Stalinism, recanted their views as “wrong and anti-Leninist,” and joined the denunciations against those who, following Trotsky, refused to do so and were bearing the full brunt of persecution.86

While the twists and turns of the events were complex and the final outcome dramatic, from Trotsky’s standpoint, nothing fundamental had changed since his 1923 analysis of Stalinism. Nonetheless, the political process by which Stalinism consolidated itself did bring the question of its dual nature—which Trotsky had already previously detected—more forcefully to the forefront. The matter of the specific form of the ongoing reaction became more pressing and assumed clearer political contours when two recognizable blocs emerged within the majority: the center, led by Stalin, and the right wing, eventually led by Bukharin. Together, these blocs constituted a relatively stable unit—the single political face of Stalinism that, in the process of destroying the opposition, spoke the same words and expressed a single political will. According to the opposition, the two blocs were semi-consciously responding to the pressures exerted by the hostile forces that had been growing in the country for years.87 But each bloc responded in its own way, according to their respective orientation—the center looked to the state and party apparatus, the right to the embryonic new bourgeoisie brought to life by the NEP. Thus a potential political contradiction existed between the two, one that was temporarily concealed in the unified attacks against the opposition. Trotsky perceived this contradiction clearly.88

In order to examine the question of the broader significance of these two factions, Trotsky returned to and attempted to develop the historical analogy with the French Revolution, which he had already broached in the 1903–4 controversy with Lenin. The fact that the degeneration of the revolution was taking place was abundantly clear. What remained to be determined with greater precision was the exact political form this process would assume. In the case of the French Revolution, degeneration had undergone a definite historical sequence: first Thermidor (the violent elimination of the radical leadership of the revolutionary regime), then Bonapartism (the concentration of power in the hands of a military “savior”). In neither case was the new bourgeois economic foundation brought about by the revolution overturned. But this was no great consolation, since, unlike 1794 and 1802,
in the Soviet case a capitalist restoration was perfectly possible. Applying this analogy, Trotsky understood Thermidor as the violent overthrow of the revolutionary regime. At this stage, he assumed that this had to refer to a dramatic and overt reversal linked to a capitalist restoration. Even after his expulsion, therefore, Thermidor remained for Trotsky a mere danger, since its actual onset would have been unambiguously recognizable in the form of a capitalist counter-revolution.

In accordance with this analogy, the right wing of the party was deemed to be the more likely political vehicle of a Soviet Thermidor. For the moment, its policy represented “capitalism on the installment plan,” facilitating the relatively slow consolidation of capitalistic forces under the political aegis of the Soviet regime. But a sudden Thermidian acceleration, the breaking out of the political shell of the Communist Party, was considered possible. Bukharin’s “get rich” rhetoric, along with the development of his economic views (in the mid 1920s he had insisted on a deepening of the NEP, offering further concession to the kulaks), were troubling signals that this danger was on its way to becoming a reality.

With respect to Bonapartism, in considering this question Trotsky could rely on a more well-established Marxist theoretical foundation. Bonapartism classically referred to the possibility that the state, once its power becomes concentrated in the hands of a single individual, could play a balancing function among contending classes and effectively attain a temporary supra-class independent agency. The analysis of Stalin’s “center” followed this template. As the political expression of the bureaucracy, this bloc “least of all expresses the attitude of any broad mass.” In other words, the center represented the tendency of the political regime to become more arbitrary and caste-like in its privileges and outlook, and further removed from the class forces at hand. Ultimately, it crystallized the possibility of the (temporary and disastrous) self-sufficiency of the political regime. This prospect was the result of the peculiar dual character of the bureaucracy as a kind of social force, lodged at the crucial junctures of the Soviet economy (particularly controlling the mechanisms of economic distribution), but also as the “pure” manifestation of the state as an independent force with its own imperious will and interests. In a more immediate political sense, however, the center also served as an intermediary force between the Left Opposition, understood as the political group representing the proletariat, and Bukharin’s right, as the petty and neo-bourgeois wing of the party. As a center, the Stalin group “moved in zigzags,” between the two wings. For the time, it seemed firmly aligned with Bukharin, but its congenital tendency toward oscillation meant that this was not necessarily a permanent arrangement.
For Trotsky, the question of Thermidor and Bonapartism was not a matter of formulating a correct analogy merely for the sake of historical precision. The echoes from the French Revolution found a very concrete political embodiment in the Soviet Union. The existence of these living forces demanded a definite political orientation toward them. The historical sequence in the French Revolution suggested that Thermidor would be the first step in degeneration, thus directing the attention of the opposition primarily to role of the right wing. And Trotsky believed that the danger represented by the right wing was the most urgent and pressing. For a while, he clearly expected that a Thermidorian turn would come first, possibly as a prelude to an eventual Bonapartist one. His characterization of the Stalinist center as oscillating between left and right might even have suggested the possibility of attempting to reorient it against the more pressing danger posed by the right wing. But in this political calculation, there were also important countervailing factors.

First, the terms of Trotsky’s critique of bureaucratism developed in 1923, which in a broad sense applied to both the center and right, nevertheless in a more narrow sense put a special emphasis on the significance of the bureaucracy, and consequently on the role played by the Stalin group in the process of degeneration. Second, even if Thermidor was recognized as the most immediate danger, this did not translate into a corresponding underestimation of Stalin’s peculiar degenerative qualities, or, worse, into the prospect of a “natural” alliance with him. For example, in a Central Committee meeting that took place in the thick of the fight against the Joint Opposition, Trotsky had singled out Stalin, denouncing him as the would-be “gravedigger” of the revolution. Further, the 1927 platform of the Joint Opposition actually stated that the center was more dangerous than the right in the long term because of the former’s insidious tendency to debase, not just destroy. A bloody and rapid right-wing Thermidor would obviously have meant the demise of the revolution. But the Stalin course promised a defeat, in addition to the complete internal corrosion of the Bolshevik tradition: “The Stalin course is the more dangerous and ruinous, in that it conceals a real deviation under the mask of familiar words and phrases.” Finally, while Trotsky’s assessment of the situation was influenced by the historical analogy of the French Revolution, it was not completely bound to it. For example, in 1928, as the conflict between the right and the center was in its initial stages Trotsky discussed the possibility of a Bonapartist turn occurring without a Thermidor. Trotsky conceptualized this turn as occurring either in the form of a military coup on the part of one of the Soviet generals or the complete monopolization of power by Stalin.
All of these possible variants and analogies were important in terms of developing a medium-term prognosis, warning the masses in the most accurate possible way about the nature of the danger, and generally remaining alert to the further evolution of the situation. But none of the possible variants opened the way to a different political conduct on the part of the opposition. So long as the right and the center acted as one, they had to be opposed as one. It was of course possible to adopt the conduct taken by Zinoviev and others when they capitulated: recanting, entering the ranks of Stalinism, and assuming the historical responsibility of complicity with it. Trotsky firmly avoided this course.

Paradoxically, however, after the expulsion of the Left Opposition, the possibility of Trotsky engaging in some form of collaboration with either of the party’s two majority factions became potentially more alluring and concrete. The political fissure between Stalin and Bukharin developed quickly. As it deepened, each group looked to Trotsky and the vanquished Left Opposition for possible support against the other. Since the opposition had just been buried under an avalanche of official vilification, this obviously was a delicate matter from the standpoint of Stalin and Bukharin. Largely informal proposals were nevertheless issued by both the center and the right, suggesting to Trotsky that rehabilitation would be possible in exchange for his political support and collaboration against the other faction. This made the prospect of an alliance of some sort more concrete, although not necessarily more sensible.

From Stalin’s perspective, his abrupt turn against the Bukharinist economic program he had hitherto endorsed constituted, all other things being equal, a significant step toward a possible reconciliation with the Left Opposition. In executing the offensive against the right wing, Stalin had in fact co-opted the slogans of the Left Opposition and appeared to be seriously considering accelerating industrialization, collectivization, and the organization of a planned economy. At this stage, the fact that these processes would actually be implemented by criminal means and at a disastrously fast pace was neither clear nor decisive. What was clear and decisive was the fact that there was no indication that Stalin would have implemented this program in any way other than his customary, bureaucratist one, particularly as he proceeded to liquidate his last remaining institutionally powerful opponent—the right wing.

Concerning Bukharin, there were clear signals that he had begun to understand the magnitude and consequences of Stalin’s bureaucratic power, and wanted to enlist the support of the Left Opposition against it. Of course, in the previous period Bukharin had been as good a Stalinist as Stalin
himself. He had covered Stalin’s moves with a theoretical gloss, collaborated on all essential questions (socialism in one country, the Comintern line, the suppression of the opposition), and had looked to Stalin to provide much of the institutional power necessary to secure his right wing economic program. But even leaving aside Bukharin’s central role in the degeneration of the party life, the fact remained that his economic outlook and programs were incompatible with that of the Left Opposition. This left-right coalition would have been correctly denounced as an alliance without either principles or a future.

Here was thus another important moment in Trotsky’s high-wire act. At this point many more in the Left Opposition, most prominently Karl Radek, Evgeni Preobrazhensky, and Ivar Smilga, capitulated to Stalin. They thought that the apparent “objective” fulfillment of the Left Opposition’s economic program deserved their conscious support and active participation. The role of the masses, intraparty democracy, and the accumulated treachery of Stalinism—in a word, bureaucratism—were relegated to a secondary status in theory, and reduced to nothing in practice, since in entering the ranks of Stalinism under these conditions it was impossible to raise them. In other words, leaving aside questions of personal courage in the face of repression and psychological attachment to the party or to the center-stage of history—the Left Oppositionists at this stage had been internally deported to various remote corners of the Soviet Union—their capitulation flowed from a truncated appraisal of the significance of the economic program. The question of the correctness of the economic program was fetishized to such an extent that it came to trump not only concerns about the intraparty regime and the enforced passivity of the masses, but also another of the Left Opposition’s pillars: the rejection of the doctrine of socialism in one country. No doubt partially in order to facilitate their re-entry into the party, Radek and Preobrazhensky began to echo the earlier Stalinist critiques of Trotsky’s permanent revolution. Those who capitulated, once again, assumed a grave historical responsibility and would in any case personally pay dearly for their actions later.

Trotsky did not deny that Stalin’s “left turn,” which had yet to reveal its criminal and brutal implementation, was in and of itself a positive and necessary development. Consequently, he gave an alliance with the center full consideration, at least in theory. But Trotsky never took a single step towards such an alliance in practice. Any sort of personal grovelling, renouncing political convictions, or abandoning the demand for the restoration of intraparty democracy on his part was out of the question. In the same way, while he considered in principle the gestures coming from Bukharin’s side, particularly
since they included a specific pledge to reinstate intraparty democracy, he also recognized that in the end insurmountable differences existed.103

In spite of Trotsky’s precipitous fall from power, this refusal to come to an agreement with either side was not the result of wounded pride or a quest for political purity. In both cases, the mere fact that he had given some consideration to the proposal drew the ire of the radical “irreconcilables” that constituted the left wing of the Left Opposition.104 Nonetheless, the party had been dragged through the mud for too long—its rules violated, its democratic life strangled, its congresses postponed or turned into debasing exercises in artificial unanimity and staged performances. In fact, the conflict between the center and the right was only a further step in this direction. The time of principled and loyal collective struggles to determine the proper course must have appeared to be a distant memory. Entering into an alliance with either faction, even if only to prevent an impending capitalist restoration, remained a theoretical necessity, even though it would no doubt have come at a terrible political cost. But simply destroying one of the former majority factions by means of a tactical alliance with the other would have been an artificial and futile attempt—yet another sudden and sordid maneuver foisted on Soviet society by and for the top.

Bukharin’s eventual defeat in 1929 ushered in a new period in Trotsky’s understanding of Stalinism that would last until 1933. During this period, the focus was squarely on Stalin’s center. Having severed the two wings of the party, the center transformed itself from a party faction into a centrist regime. The center had been characterized as a faction by zigzags and oscillations, as demonstrated by its violent swing to the left to destroy Bukharin. Centrism retained the same oscillating character, which still derived from its peculiar sociological roots in the bureaucracy—its capacity to act as if it were suspended from existing class relations.105 But since it could no longer oscillate between the left and right wings it had vanquished, its oscillation was displaced onto a higher plane: between a course to maintain, and even develop, the gains of the revolution (though in monstrously distorted fashion) and a conservative and reactionary course. According to Trotsky, the manner in which the oscillations took place was once again far from immaterial. Even the center’s swings to the left—toward industrialization, collectivization, and a planned economy—were of a marked bureaucratic character. Centrism, therefore, regardless of which particular swing it happened to engage in at any given moment, always continued to demoralize and induce passivity in the masses when it did not subject them to outright terror. The typical designation of Stalinism employed by Trotsky at this stage was therefore “bureaucratic centrism.”
In spite of Stalin’s political victory, the dangerous oscillations of the regime and the ensuing social crises made this period a very tumultuous one. Concerning the historical analogy with the French Revolution, at this stage Trotsky was able to express more clearly the limits and dangers of its uses. Addressing this point in 1930, Trotsky wrote that “The danger in this question, as in every other historic question consists of the fact that we are too apt to draw analogies too formally, no matter how important and fruitful they may be, and that we are wont to reduce the concrete process to abstractions.” Furthermore, he affirmed that the actual form the counter-revolution would assume was not necessarily bound by the lessons of the past in any strict sense: “when the counter-revolution does come, will it take a Bonapartist, a Thermidorian or a combined third form? It is impossible to say, but our duty consists in observing attentively the existing elements of the possible variants of counter-revolution and their dialectic development.”

The use of the historical analogies from the French Revolution would be further adjusted in February 1935, when Trotsky wrote an article titled, “The Workers’ State, Thermidor and Bonapartism.” He recognized then that his understanding of the political and social substance of Thermidor in the French case had been inadequate. He had incorrectly thought of Thermidor as a definitive and overtly counter-revolutionary capture of the state by the capitalist class using insurrectionary means. In reality, the French Thermidor had been an intraparty affair—a change in the internal composition of the Jacobin regime. In this sense, applying the analogy correctly meant recognizing that Thermidor had already occurred in the Soviet Union roughly a decade earlier with the defeat of the Left Opposition. The revision of the analogy however, did not imply that it was also necessary to reassess the political conduct of the Left Opposition in the past. It did not mean, specifically, that by the mid 1920s the Left Opposition should have left the party or that at the time the Soviet Union had ceased to be a workers’ state and a proletarian dictatorship, however distorted. As in the French case, Thermidor did not affect the reversal of the social accomplishment of the revolution, but it did impress a deeply conservative and dangerous turn in the political regime.

In the same article, Trotsky also reiterated the idea that the historical analogies from the French Revolution were best understood not sequentially, in the strict historical order—first Thermidor, then Bonapartism—but as parallel tendencies both constitutively present in Stalinism from its inception. In retrospect, it can be argued that these historical analogies, in spite of their initial formal inaccuracy and the dangers of schematism, had
served Trotsky well in his analytical tasks. Particularly when understood as parallel tendencies, it is possible to recognize in the arc traced by Stalinism both Bonapartist elements—the hypertrophic state, the prominent role of the bureaucracy (including its military and police sections), the cult of the leader, the transformation of congresses into recurring plebiscites for the regime—as well as Thermidorian ones—the rightward swings in economic policy, doctrinal expressions of retrenchment and conservatism such a “socialism in one country,” the “pacifist” legitimation of international capitalism abroad, the popular front, etc. Moreover, the use of both analogies as tendencies as well as stages served to emphasize that in neither case did they lead to a capitalist restoration—not even when it was recognized that Thermidor had already occurred. In spite of all the unpleasant echoes of the past evoked by the conduct of the Stalinist regime, the counter-revolution had not yet triumphed.

In a political sense, therefore, even after his expulsion from the Soviet Union Trotsky’s orientation had not changed. The Soviet Union remained a workers’ state. Concretely, this meant that nationalized property and, more than that, something of the living inheritance of the revolution remained intact. In fact, the introduction of the Five-year Plan and the physical destruction of the kulaks illustrated a highly distorted deepening of the class nature of Soviet society. In addition, the political institutions debased by Stalinism had not been completely destroyed. The existing regime remained a proletarian dictatorship. Accordingly, Trotsky insisted on the necessity to reform, reorient, and recapture the party and the Comintern.109 The conditions were such that it was impossible for the Left Opposition to actually operate from within these organizations. Having already placed the burden of a political break on Stalinism, the Left Opposition by necessity organized itself as an external opposition. It was exiled, hounded, vilified, and nonetheless remained loyal to the old banners. As was the case before, the point was not that it was necessary to support Stalin and his regime in order to defend the Soviet Union and advance the revolution. On the contrary, it was necessary to oppose and fight Stalin in order to do so.

In 1933, Trotsky substantially revised his position and reconsidered the proper political orientation to be taken toward Stalinism. In his high-wire act, this revision moved him toward a harsher assessment of it. The persecution he had suffered during the previous period meant that Trotsky was subjected to definite pressures of a personal and psychological character. And indeed many of the people who had some form of political contact with him in opposing Stalinism from the left urged Trotsky to move as boldly as possible in that direction. Down the path followed by people like Max Eastman, Karl
Korsch, Amadeo Bordiga, Bruno Rizzi, Max Shachtman, James Burnham, and many more after that, lay a complete break not just with Stalinism, but the Soviet Union as well. There lay the idea of Soviet “imperialism,” “state capitalism,” “bureaucratic collectivism,” and other such theoretical postulates behind which stood one simple political intuition: there is nothing left in the Soviet Union worth defending. Trotsky would always detect a sort of “political abstentionism”\textsuperscript{110} behind these theories, as well as a creeping adaptation to bourgeois democracy and Western imperialism.\textsuperscript{111} Trotsky’s reassessment of Stalinism, in any case, flowed from a development of world-historical significance—Hitler’s rise to power—and constituted a careful step, not a dive into the sort of left extremism that, at least on the question of the Soviet Union, manifested an alarming correspondence to the right.\textsuperscript{112}

The Comintern had been going through years of decay. The accumulation of these quantitative changes had finally caused a qualitative transformation marked by the latest disastrous defeat in Germany. The Stalinist theory of social fascism had created a policy toward the Nazi danger that could be characterized as official indifference, or even benign neglect. The impending Nazi victory was portrayed as a positive stage in the transition to socialism.\textsuperscript{113} German Communist Party members were encouraged to boast, “First Hitler, then us.” This disastrous strategy had sabotaged any possible coalition to stop the rise to power of the Nazis.\textsuperscript{114} The failure of the Communist Party to stop Hitler, in spite of its colossal scale, was actually not the decisive factor in Trotsky’s reassessments. In theory, a defeat might have occurred even under a different and better leadership. But it was the Comintern’s reaction to the event that provided the tangible proof that a fundamental line had been crossed in Moscow. In the face of such a cataclysmic defeat, not a single person in the Comintern asked to convene a new congress, or to even consider the possibility of reassessing the existing policy of the third period. It was as though nothing serious had happened.

Trotsky well understood the impending consequences of Hitler’s rule and had tried to warn the German workers as well as the party about the bitter fruit that would reward its policy. The conduct of the Comintern suggested to him that the possibility of reforming it was completely exhausted. It was no longer possible to change such an organization, and remain, even in principle, an opposing faction under the same banner. This no doubt came at a cost. For example, abandoning the formal allegiance to the old institutions might have given more impetus to the sort of accusations Trotsky had been subjected to for about a decade—that “Trotskyism” represented a deviation from “Leninism.” But the utter putrefaction of the Comintern had finally made it “dead to the revolution.”\textsuperscript{115} It was time to “change one’s dirty shirt,”
the way Lenin had discarded the name of Social Democracy after it had been soiled by the political betrayal of the reformists in World War I.

The fact that Trotsky’s change of orientation toward Stalinism was caused not by a change within the Soviet Union but by an international event needs to be underscored. This is a reminder that a crucial component of Trotsky’s critique of Stalinism was his attack against “socialism in one country.” Beyond various tactical turns, this doctrine had been imposed as the central strategic perspective for the Comintern. Numerous reversals abroad were to a large extent the result of the Stalinist regime and its policies. The historical record of Trotsky’s relentless criticism of these policies is remarkable. On Germany, China, Germany once again, Ethiopia, and Spain, Trotsky was able to predict many of the disasters, betrayals, and complicity, and to explain how Stalinism was acting as the conscious organizer of defeats. But more than this, Trotsky spelled out a concrete political alternative. Although destined to remain within the realm of historical speculation, a review of Trotsky’s analysis of the Spanish Civil War, for example, would show that he anticipated the consequences of the popular front, of the reversal of land seizures and factory occupations, and the counter-revolutionary role played by Stalinism in strangling the forces within the anti-Franco coalition. Such defeats were not inevitable, and in this sense Stalinism should be seen as a significant cause of them.

From a different standpoint, however, the defeats abroad, particularly early on, were also the cause of Stalinism. During and long after 1917, the Bolsheviks unanimously believed that only a revolutionary victory in the advanced capitalist countries could ensure the safety and successful socialist development for the Soviet Union. The defeat of the Soviet regime and the impossibility of socialism in the absence of this condition were taken for granted by all. The more the revolutionary prospects abroad dimmed, however, the more the bureaucracy could “rise higher and higher as the sole light of salvation.” In other words, defeats in the international sphere strengthened the hand of the bureaucracy and contributed to the climate of national retrenchment against those who insisted on the need to remain oriented toward the international proletariat. Soon this secondary and initially quite unintended effect of these defeats began to crystallize into a conscious doctrine and powerfully affected the internal process of development of the Soviet Union.

Thus Stalinism was initially a mere symptom of the crisis of the international communist movement, but soon began to also function as an active force, as the conscious organizer of its defeats. It is this contradictory character of Trotsky’s explanation of Stalinism that, as we have seen, led Kolakowski
to dismiss it altogether.\textsuperscript{121} It is the dialectical character of this contradiction, however, that Kolakowski failed to grasp. Without engaging the question of dialectics in much detail, it is possible to briefly explain what this means by relying on two points in Bertell Ollman’s work on the subject.\textsuperscript{122} First, dialectics is “a way of thinking [that] expand[s] our notion of anything to include, as aspects of what it is, both the process by which it has become and the broader interactive context in which it is found.”\textsuperscript{123} Second, “the common sense notions of ‘cause’ and ‘determine’ that are founded on . . . logical independence and absolute priority do not and cannot apply” to the dialectical method.\textsuperscript{124} Both of these points are relevant to disentangle what is one of the crucial knots of Trotsky’s understanding of Stalinism: the relationship between the presence and agency of the bureaucracy and Russia’s isolation and backwardness.

Trotsky did not approach this question through a one-sided and static causal explanation. At the most general level, it is true, he accounted for the existence of the bureaucracy by pointing to the economic backwardness of Russia and to the failure of the revolution to spread westward. But this was in no sense a one-way causality. Trotsky pointed out how the bureaucracy in turn constituted a mighty impulse toward both backwardness and isolation. With respect to the former, Trotsky explained the way in which the bureaucracy’s economic policy was constantly sabotaged by its own privileges and parasitism,\textsuperscript{125} its ideological inability to even measure and confront realistically the economic problems at hand,\textsuperscript{126} its encouragement and multiplication of social inequality,\textsuperscript{127} and its violent and arbitrary zigzags.\textsuperscript{128} As to the latter—Isolation—I have already discussed Trotsky’s detailed account of the bureaucracy’s role in the defeats of the international proletariat.\textsuperscript{129} The dialectical relation at play in this instance is described quite explicitly: “The Soviet bureaucracy became more self-confident, the heavier the blows dealt to the world working class. Between these two facts there was not only a chronological, but a causal connection, and one which worked in two directions. The leaders of the bureaucracy promoted the proletarian defeats; the defeats promoted the rise of the bureaucracy.”\textsuperscript{130} Therefore, Trotsky did not examine “bureaucracy,” “isolation,” and “backwardness” as abstractions that possess a life of their own and form an inherent analytical distinction. Rather, he saw them all in their process of interrelated becoming. “Sociological problems,” noted Trotsky, “would certainly be simpler, if social phenomena had always a finished character.”\textsuperscript{131}

The fact that it was an international development that convinced Trotsky to revise his position toward Stalinism is therefore evidence of the breadth of Trotsky’s perspective and his commitment to internationalism as a principle for concrete political orientation, and also puts his earlier
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attempts to make sense of the phenomenon into a fuller context. His analysis of bureaucratism, and then of bureaucratic centrism, represented a probing examination of the internal processes and distortions in the Soviet Union. But these internal processes were not understood by abstracting them from the international situation. They existed in a broader, more complex analytical matrix Trotsky developed to make sense of the problem. The very outlook of national retrenchment and provincial conservatism was characteristic of Stalinism as a phenomenon, and Trotsky’s refusal to capitulate to it was a sort of opposition in the second order: refusing to employ the outlook of Stalinism in the process of examining it.

Many political and theoretical consequences flowed from Trotsky’s reassessment of the proper orientation toward Stalinism and a series of changes in his outlook rapidly ensued. If it had become impossible to capture the old banners, new ones would have to be raised. Accordingly, Trotsky called for the founding of a new International and began the preparatory political and organizational work to reorient the Left Opposition to this new task. If the Communist Party in the Soviet Union was also “dead to the revolution,” and if this party blocked all legal venues to change, then a revolutionary program was necessary in the Soviet Union as well. In addition, as explained above, the general reassessment of this period included the question of historical analogies, which was also now finalized with the correction of the meaning of Thermidor and the notion that Thermidor and Bonapartism were parallel and constitutive tendencies of Stalinism. Trotsky’s mature, final word on Stalinism, in a theoretical as well as political sense, was now finally in place. The essential points of this perspective can be summarized as follows. The socialization of property put into place by the proletarian revolution that took place in Russia was in itself insufficient to remove the basis for the individual struggle for survival and achieve socialism. Tendencies toward bureaucratization would always come into play after a proletarian revolution, even under the most favorable conditions. These tendencies came to bear on the Soviet regime in the form of physiological and psychological reactions against the revolutionary impulse. More importantly, the economic backwardness of Russia and the international failure of the revolutionary movement, particularly in Germany, exacerbated these tendencies. The proletarian revolution in a backward country, therefore, did not resolve the question of socialism but merely opened it. The resulting regime constituted a dictatorship of the proletariat, but under the existing conditions had to be understood as a “transitional regime” standing between capitalism and socialism.

This regime was endowed with a dual character and subject to two opposing tendencies. The first was the progressive thrust toward socialism
on the basis of socialized property, economic planning, the development and maturation of the proletarian and peasant classes internally, and the continued effort to spur class struggle internationally. The ultimate result of this tendency would be communism: the withering away of the state apparatus and consequently of the state system itself. The second force was propelled by contradictions of internal and international scope. Their principal manifestation was the growth of a parasitic and reactionary bureaucracy attached to a state apparatus of increasing size and totalitarian ferocity. The ultimate outcome of this second force was the complete overturn of the revolution and the restoration of capitalist forms of property. As a result of the two tendencies it was subjected to, the transitional Soviet regime was fundamentally unstable. In spite of its apparent strength, the Stalinist regime rested on a brittle foundation, riven by many deep contradictions, “between the city and the village, between the proletariat and the peasantry (these two kinds of contradictions are not identical), between the national republics and districts, between the different groups of peasantry, between the different layers of the working class, between the different groups of consumers and, finally, between the Soviet state as a whole and its capitalist environment.” The transitional character of the regime meant that it could not indefinitely manage these contradictions—one of the two tendencies would eventually have to prevail. The Stalinist bureaucracy was thus understood by Trotsky as a ruling stratum—a caste composed of “specialists in distribution,” not a ruling class. This caste did not own the means of production in the same sense as a bourgeois class did in a capitalist country. It did not constitute a class because it rested upon a set of property relations that did not in principle require its existence. In this sense the bureaucracy was considered a parasitical and malignant excrescence on the body of existing socialist property relations, under conditions of backwardness and isolation. Members of this caste could and did enjoy very significant social privileges. However, exactly because they rested on a system that in a social as well as ideological sense did not allow private property, they could not systematically maintain these privileges and pass them on as they saw fit. For the same reason, there was nothing remotely “capitalistic” about the social function and behavior of the bureaucracy. Furthermore, while this caste clearly exercised tremendous, and in a sense unchecked, political power, it did so under the social parameters established by the Russian Revolution—nationalized property, the legal abolition of private property, etc. So long as it existed in this peculiar sociological form, the bureaucratic caste was therefore compelled to defend and in some cases even extend—to be sure, in its own way—the social character of the Soviet Union as a workers’ state. With all its crimes
and horrors against socialism and humankind in general, the Soviet Union remained therefore in a meaningful sense the distorted expression of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The proper designation for the class character of the Soviet Union was thus a “degenerated workers’ state.” The contradictory character of the Soviet Union, in sum, cut across both the economic and the political fields, as Trotsky noted:

[D]espite its economic successes, which were determined by the nationalization of the means of production, Soviet society completely preserves a contradictory transitional character, and, measured by the inequality of living conditions and the privileges of the bureaucracy, it still stands much closer to the regime of capitalism than to future communism. At the same time, . . . despite monstrous bureaucratic degeneration, the Soviet state still remains the historical instrument of the working class insofar as it assures the development of economy and culture on the basis of nationalized means of production and, by virtue of this, prepares the conditions for a genuine emancipation of the toilers through the liquidation of the bureaucracy and of social inequality.

From this analysis of the bureaucracy and of the class character of the Soviet Union flowed two political conclusions. First, while one ought to fight for a revolution in the Soviet Union, the character of this event would be political, not social. Since the Soviet Union remained a workers’ state, its social character would not be fundamentally changed by a revolution. Once again, this was not simply a matter of replacing a new ruling clique with another, but the culmination of a radical political mobilization, which would bring about institutional changes themselves aimed at the further revitalization and reactivation of the Soviet masses. According to Trotsky’s analysis, in the absence of the expansion of the revolution abroad, the change in the regime and its ensuing democratization would of course have only a temporary effect. Under conditions of national isolation, the tendencies of bureaucratization would eventually reassert themselves. But the two fields of struggle were closely intertwined. This was not Kolakowski’s “struggle” in the field of formal logic between the chicken and the egg, but a struggle of living social forces connected to one another in contradictory fashion as part of a complex matrix stretching across nations and classes. A revolutionary victory against Stalinism in the Soviet Union would have breathed new life in the international proletariat, in the same way that the October Revolution did.

The second conclusion was that in the field of international relations, because of the class character of the Soviet Union as a workers’ state, it was
necessary to maintain the position of an unconditional defense of the USSR against imperialism. Here the question was also theoretically complex and politically delicate. The unconditional defense did not mean the unquestioning support of any and all military and diplomatic maneuvers on the part Stalinism. On the contrary, as we have seen, Trotsky was emphatic and unsparing in his criticism of the wretched character of Moscow’s policies. The dual character of the Soviet regime necessitated a careful modulation of one’s political orientation toward it. In the case of a war against the Soviet Union waged by Nazi Germany or Western imperialism, for example, Trotsky insisted that from the standpoint of the international struggle for socialism, this could not be a matter of indifference. While the specific tactical issues confronted by the Left Opposition would be complex, in a general sense political and material support to the USSR ought to be unconditional. As already discussed, when the Stalinist regime engaged in predatory behavior, as against Finland and Poland on the eve of World War II, this required an even more careful modulation of the political line. The sort of social revolution at the point of a gun inflicted by Stalinism on these countries required a careful consideration of the class implications, not a hasty moralistic denunciation. Trotsky’s political approach to this matter made him the target of repeated accusations from the left of insufficient radicalism, or even complicity. But an approach of this sort was actually quite common in other areas of Marxist politics: “Just as revolutionists defend every trade union, even the most thoroughly reformist, from the class enemy, combating intransigently the treacherous leaders at the same time, so the parties of the Fourth International defend the USSR against the blows of imperialism without for a single moment giving up the struggle against the reactionary Stalinist apparatus.” Far from scandalous at the level of principles or untenable in practice, this was exactly the sort of capacity to maneuver without surrendering principles that had characterized Bolshevism in the past.

III. TROTSKY AS A POLITICAL ALTERNATIVE

A quarter of a century proved too brief a span for the revolutionary rearm- ing of the world proletarian vanguard, and too long a period for preserving the soviet system intact in an isolated backward country. Mankind is now paying for this with a new imperialist war; but the basic task of our epoch has not changed, for the simple reason that it has not been solved.

While his political and theoretical outlook remained fixed until the end of his life, Trotsky’s high-wire act was to continue on all of the questions
discussed above—the class character of the Soviet Union, the nature of the Stalinist regime at home and abroad, and the kind of revolution, if any, that should dislodge it from power. It continued in part because these already complex phenomena themselves continued to evolve and generate new puzzles and challenges to the observer. For example, what was the significance of the Stalinist strangling of the Spanish Revolution? What conclusions should be drawn from the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact? Exactly because of the transitional and unstable character of the Soviet Union, one had to continue to measure and to assess, to consider and to reconsider. Trotsky did so, though he did not revise the fundamental points just described. The high-wire act also continued because Trotsky was not attempting to arrive at a correct determination of these questions for the sake of accuracy alone. He engaged in this analytical work as part of the process of organizing an international political opposition to Stalinism. Trotsky’s approach was not therefore of the contemplative sort. His analysis emerged from a constant process of political friction—debating with comrades; encouraging, prodding, and challenging sympathizers and reluctant allies; and fighting enemies. Trotsky’s high-wire act, therefore, should be considered at the level of political theory as well as practice.

Starting from Marx’s famous remark about the “kitchens of the future,” the theoretical question of the transition to socialism has been for the most part deferred until the unfolding of history could transform it into a more concrete problem of orientation and action. The experience of the Russian Revolution provided the opportunity and the pressing necessity to confront it directly. The Bolsheviks’ revolutionary triumph and early successes were a practical demonstration of how well they understood the early stages of this transition. The basic framework they employed in the revolutionary struggle—a framework to which Trotsky had contributed substantially—was adequate to provide a general sketch of the challenges of a post-revolutionary period: the backwardness of Russia, the imperialist epoch, the internationalist perspective, the dialectic of intraparty relations, and the new political forms of mediation between the party and the masses. But this would not be sufficient to navigate the uncharted waters ahead. Many unprecedented and in some ways unexpected problems and phenomena arose in the post-revolutionary period—most important of all, Stalinism. The existing theory of the transition to socialism, such as Lenin articulated in State and Revolution, proved inadequate, and, as I have discussed, so did Lenin’s early attempts to stem bureaucratization.

Against this background, Trotsky’s contribution stands out as a remarkable application and advancement of Marxist theory—the most important since Lenin—and for its ability to construct, against overwhelming odds, a
Marxist political alternative to Stalinism. At the level of theory, Trotsky in his high-wire act was able to avoid, on one side, the trap of schematism. His use of historical analogies, his understanding of the class character of the Soviet Union and the bureaucracy were original and dynamic, not a mechanical application of an existing body of theory. Trotsky's insistence on the transitional character of the Soviet Union illustrates his awareness of this trap:

Doctrinaires will doubtless not be satisfied with this hypothetical definition. They would like categorical formulae: yes—yes and no—no. Sociological problems would certainly be simpler, if social phenomena had always a finished character. There is nothing more dangerous, however, than to throw out of reality, for the sake of logical completeness, elements which today violate your scheme and tomorrow may wholly overturn it. In our analysis, we have above all avoided doing violence to a dynamic social formation which has had no precedent and knows no analogies. The scientific task, as well as the political, is not to give a finished definition to an unfinished process, but to follow all its stages, separate its progressive from its reactionary tendencies, expose their mutual relations, foresee possible variants of development, and find in this foresight a basis for action.\(^{156}\)

At the same time, Trotsky avoided the opposite danger of eclecticism. The essential parameters of the Marxist theoretical inheritance were preserved in his analysis. Trotsky rejected in particular the notion that the Soviet Union represented a new and lasting type of society—either bureaucratic collectivist or state capitalist. These kinds of arguments were not always of a Marxist sort. For example, during the cold war the economist John Kenneth Galbraith proposed the idea of a lasting convergence between the East and the West. The economic system of the Soviet Union, he argued, was not only permanently in place—a return of free market capitalism in the Soviet Union would be impossible—but the West was beginning to adapt more and more to it.\(^{157}\) These sorts of arguments were predicated on the permanence of the Soviet Union, positioning moreover the transcendence of the basic Marxist framework of a transition between capitalism and socialism. Trotsky's diagnosis of the Soviet Union as transitional in this way also cut across the danger of eclecticism because, while it recognized that a fluid epochal period had been opened by the Russian Revolution, a period that could produce odd mutations, its consummation would have to occur with either the triumph of socialism or the restoration of capitalism. Trotsky's approach to the Marxist tradition was thus neither mechanical application of a schema nor flippant revisionism. He had been confronted by an unprecedented and under-theorized phenomenon. The existing theoretical
tradition was necessary but not sufficient to make sense of it. He thus put to use the theoretical tools of Marxism, sharpening them in the process. In all these respects Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinism is similar to Lenin’s analysis of imperialism, and the theoretical contribution is no less important.

At the level of theory, it is also important to underscore the multifaceted nature of Trotsky’s analysis and its capacity to address Stalinism’s various aspects. I have already sketched out these aspects in chapter three, arguing that Gramsci’s analysis of Stalinism was substantially truncated and unable to account for many of them. Trotsky’s approach addressed all of these aspects of Stalinism. Concerning the historical aspect, I have shown that Trotsky was able to capture something of Stalinism’s essential features already by 1923, before the process could acquire a proper name. Trotsky understood the complex geography of Stalinism as well. Although in his exile Trotsky was chased by Stalinism across the globe, the reverse was also true. He understood that, in spite of its narrow nationalist outlook, Stalinism was an international phenomenon in terms of both its agents and its field of action. Accordingly, he followed closely developments in many different contexts, integrating them into his general framework. The programmatic aspect of Stalinism, as already noted, is especially elusive because in matters of concrete policy it oscillated from one extreme to the other—from social fascism to the popular front, from the enrichment of the kulaks to their elimination as a class. Beginning with his analysis of the early function of Stalin’s “center” through that of “bureaucratic centrism,” Trotsky was able to clearly identify the oscillating character of Stalinism as essential to it. The doctrinal aspect of Stalinism consisted of the vulgarization and in many cases outright falsification of the theoretical foundation of the Russian Revolution and the party that led it. This meant first and foremost the adoption of the theory of socialism in one country. Beginning already in the early 1920s this backsliding was conducted under the sign of a struggle against “Trotskyism,” and Trotsky had no difficulty, or choice, in exposing both its fraudulence and consequences. More broadly, this aspect concerned the meaning and standing of Leninism as a tradition, a matter on which Trotsky provided a clear alternative. Concerning the organizational aspect of Stalinism, this was fully put into focus during Trotsky’s fight for intraparty democracy, in his critique that the party and the Comintern had become mere bureaucratic apparatuses void of any democratic and political content. The political aspect of Stalinism concerned its existence not merely as an abstract phenomenon, but as embodied in a living, well-defined political force, beginning from the center-right alliance in the 1920s. As discussed, Trotsky approached Stalinism not merely as the passive outcome of certain objective difficulties, but as an active force as well. In so doing, he
addressed the related “existential” dimension of Stalinism as well—the complex psychological process by which honest and committed revolutionaries were transformed into Gramsci’s “cannibals,” the savage agents of reaction. Personally confronted by this danger, Trotsky provided a masterful analysis of the logic of the process of innermost individual degeneration, from the capitulations of the late 1920s to the terrible spectacle of the defendants’ conduct at the Moscow trials in the 1930s. Finally, contrary to Kolakowski’s claims, Trotsky did not ignore the social aspect of Stalinism. He analyzed the way in which Stalinism was connected to the bureaucracy as a social force, to the social stratification within the party and state, and to the capitalistic forces that emerged during the NEP social regime. He was also able to perceive the possibility of a dramatic transformation of the Stalinist regime’s social content—a capitalist restoration induced from within.

At the level of political practice, Trotsky’s high-wire act avoided the capitulation to Stalinism, either as active participant or as a fellow traveler, and the outright abandonment of Marxism in the form of an adaptation to bourgeois democracy and imperialism. This was not simply a negative task. It was a matter of charting a course for political action, independent from the powerful currents of the time. It was also not a mere personal matter of resisting temptations or unhealthy habits. Trotsky was at the center of a collective effort to organize an international opposition.

A discussion of one last episode will help illustrate the danger of his high-wire act at the level of political practice and pose the question of how to understand the effectiveness of Trotsky’s oppositional efforts. Already in the first substantial statement of his mature position on Stalinism, Trotsky had to recognize that his “break with the Communist International and the orientation toward the new International have posed anew the question of the social character of the USSR.” This question continued to resurface in a number of debates in which Trotsky became involved, particularly with those “lefts” who were in or around the political groups that coalesced in the Fourth International. Much like the “irreconcilables” of the Left Opposition during Trotsky’s last days in the Soviet Union, these people essentially believed that Stalinism had completely uprooted the legacy of the October Revolution, and that nothing worth defending remained of it. In this later period, however, the quality of the characters involved was quite different, as Trotsky now had to argue with pale imitations of the irreconcilables of old. Many of these were recalcitrant petty-bourgeois intellectuals, not oppositionists staking out an uncompromising position on the wretched nature of Stalinism while dying in a gulag. While many moments of this period could be discussed, to conclude this account of the high-wire act I will briefly return to an episode
that took place in 1939, near the end of Trotsky’s life. The debate began on the eve of World War II and once again had to do with the class character of the Soviet Union. Trotsky was engaged in a struggle against a faction that had formed within the Socialist Workers Party, the American section of the Fourth International. This faction was led by James Burnham, a professor of philosophy at New York University, and Max Shachtman, a former leader of the Communist Party who had been expelled in the 1920s by the Stalinists for his agreement with the Left Opposition. It was at this point that the alleged radical change in Trotsky’s perspective, the “pessimistic turn” hailed by Alasdair MacIntyre, took place. For different purposes, this moment is also often cited as a turning point by proponents of various “left” offshoots from Trotskyism. Shachtman himself claimed that Trotsky here had “turned a corner in his thinking so abruptly as to bring him into violent collision with the main pillars of theory of Stalinism he had long and stoutly upheld.” Later, Tony Cliff, the most prominent contemporary theorist of “state capitalism,” also claimed that Trotsky made an important shift toward the end of his life in his understanding of the class nature of the Soviet Union and the necessary political orientation toward it. In all cases, the claim is that Trotsky abandoned or came close to abandoning the position that the Soviet Union was still a workers’ state, albeit a degenerated one, and renounced the idea of its unconditional defense.

This was not the case. Trotsky did not turn into a pessimist who rejected Marxism, as claimed by MacIntyre. Nor did he abandon the essential theoretical and political tenets of his understanding of the Soviet Union explained above. In the form of Shachtman and Burnham’s arguments, Trotsky was confronting the confluence of different political moods within the Fourth International. The moods consisted in part of exhaustion in the face of the objective difficulties confronting the movement. This resulted in the frustrated attempt on the part of certain politically immature elements to compensate for these difficulties by flinging more severe terms of analysis at the regime. This was the kind of reaction against the monstrosities of Stalinism that tended to degenerate into a purely moral posture.

Shachtman and Burnham articulated these moods by groping toward an argument about the Soviet Union as a stable, aggressive entity, void of any progressive or redeeming feature whatsoever and representing the gravest political danger of the age. Alongside Nazism, it foreshadowed the prospect of a new and horrible tendency toward world totalitarianism. Trotsky insisted that this was not the case and defended his earlier positions. The Stalinist regime was transitional and unstable—a degenerated workers’ state. This could change only by means of a political revolution under the banner of
socialism—the physical elimination of its degeneration—or through a restoration that would reintroduce capitalist property relations and de-nationalize property—something that had not yet occurred. In the process of debating Shachtman and Burnham, however, Trotsky offered the following analysis:

If this war provokes, as we firmly believe, a proletarian revolution, it must inevitably lead to the overthrow of the bureaucracy in the USSR and regeneration of Soviet democracy . . . In that case the question as to whether the Stalinist bureaucracy was a 'class' or a growth on the workers' state will be automatically solved. To every single person it will become clear that in the process of the development of the world revolution the Soviet bureaucracy was only an episodic relapse. If, however, it is conceded that the present war will provoke not revolution but a decline of the proletariat, then there remains another alternative: the further decay of monopoly capitalism, its further fusion with the state and the replacement of democracy wherever it still remained by a totalitarian regime. The inability of the proletariat to take into its hands the leadership of society could actually lead under these conditions to the growth of a new exploiting class from the Bonapartist fascist bureaucracy. This would be, according to all indications, a regime of decline, signalizing the eclipse of civilization.

Trotsky continued,

If the second prognosis proves to be correct, then, of course, the bureaucracy will become a new exploiting class. However onerous the second perspective may be, if the world proletariat should actually prove incapable of fulfilling the mission placed upon it by the course of development, nothing else would remain except only to recognize that the socialist program, based on the internal contradictions of capitalist society, ended as a utopia. It is self-evident that a new 'minimum' program would be required—for the defense of the slaves of the totalitarian bureaucratic society.164

Put in these terms, Trotsky's analysis was clearly proven to be wrong. It was wrong because it excluded another possibility: the survival and in fact the expansion of capitalism after the war. Although Europe and much of the world indeed lay in ruins as a result of World War II, world capitalism still possessed tremendous economic, political, and military reserves, which it brought to the field in the form of its still ascending American section.165 But in laying out this scenario, Trotsky was operating on the psychological and political terrain of Shachtman and Burnham, not his own. He was
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attempting to speak their language, address their concern by trying to make the case for the necessity to fight through the present difficulties. To do so, in the course of the debate he provisionally conceded the possibility of the Soviet Union having a very different sociological character, attempting to persuade Shachtman and Burnham that their political conclusions, at least through the war period, should not change.\textsuperscript{166} Trotsky's immediate political concern was in fact to persuade the two and prevent a split in the party. But Trotsky's own strategic outlook was in reality quite different from this cataclysmic dichotomy. The possible variants coming out of that conjuncture were not simply either a victorious revolution on the heels of World War II or a descent into a totalitarian abyss. The question of the future of socialism had to be posed on a different historical scale.

While it was certainly important to develop a correct tactical position in the short term, seeking out openings for action where possible, there were even more important tasks and challenges in the long term. Trotsky was painfully aware of the numeric weakness of the Trotskyist movement. The political work he did in the last part of his life was therefore also an attempt to raise the banner of Marxism anew, and to maintain, under terribly difficult conditions, a political and ideological continuity with the period inaugurated by the Russian Revolution. It is for this reason that Trotskyism appeared (and still does appear) as a traditionalism of sorts.\textsuperscript{167} From the standpoint of the long durée, it is possible to see Trotskyism as a defensive maneuver, even a retreat in a period of unprecedented reaction and retrenchment. Without foregoing the immediate and short-term opportunities as they became available, it was necessary to consolidate and preserve the legacy of Marxism and of the Russian Revolution. Although immersed in the complexities and tactical details of several different contexts, Trotsky remained very conscious of the broader, long-term significance of his work of political opposition.\textsuperscript{168} Trotsky already articulated this point in the same article being discussed here, deflating the dichotomous scenario based on the immediate prospects of the war:

Twenty-five years in the scales of history, when it is a question of the profoundest changes in economic and cultural systems, weigh less than an hour in the life of man. What good is the individual who, because of empirical failures in the course of an hour or a day, renounces a goal that he set for himself on the basis of the experience and analysis of his entire previous lifetime? In the years of the darkest Russian reaction (1907 to 1917) we took as our starting point those revolutionary possibilities which were revealed by the Russian proletariat in 1905. In the
years of world reaction we must proceed from those possibilities which the Russian proletariat revealed in 1917.\textsuperscript{169}

Long before this 1939 debate, Trotsky had expressed the necessity to see his work from the standpoint of the long \textit{durée}. He had done so in 1929, reacting to the second wave of capitulations from the Left Opposition, reminding his comrades, “We have before us the prospect of a long, tenacious struggle and of a long labour of education.”\textsuperscript{170} He had done so in 1932, in similar terms, during a lecture he gave to university students in Copenhagen on the occasion of the fifteenth anniversary of the Russian Revolution:

\begin{quote}
[I]n criticism, as well as in creative activity, perspective is necessary . . . Periods of time must be commensurate with the tasks, and not with individual caprices. Fifteen years! How much that is in the life of one man! Within that period not a few of our generation were borne to their grave and those who remain have added innumerable gray heirs. But these same fifteen years—what an insignificant period in the life of a people! Only a minute in the clock of history.\textsuperscript{171}
\end{quote}

Most memorably, Trotsky had expressed the significance of the long \textit{durée} at the very end of his 1929 autobiography. In an extraordinary reflection that deserves extensive quotation, Trotsky weaved the significance of the long \textit{durée} in the political prospects of the age, as well as in his personal life:

\begin{quote}
The working class of Russia, under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, made an attempt to effect a reconstruction of life that would exclude the possibility of humanity’s going through these periodical fits of insanity, and would lay the foundations of a higher culture. That was the sense of the October revolution. To be sure, the problem it has set itself has not yet been solved. But in its very essence, this problem demands many decades. Moreover, the October revolution should be considered as a starting-point of the newest history of humanity as a whole. Toward the end of the Thirty Years’ War, the German Reformation must have appeared the work of men who had broken out of a lunatic asylum. To a certain extent, it really was: European humanity broken out of the medieval monastery. Modern Germany, England, the United States and modern world in general would never have been possible without the Reformation with its countless victims. If victims are generally to be permitted—but whose permission could one ask?—it is certainly victims that move humanity forward. The same can be said of the French
\end{quote}
Revolution. That narrow-minded, reactionary pedant, Taine, imagined that he was making a most profound discovery when he established the fact that a few years after the execution of Louis XVI, the French people were poorer and more unhappy than under the old regime. But the whole point of the matter is that such events as the great French Revolution cannot be viewed on the scale of ‘a few years.’ Without the great revolution, the entire new France would never have been possible, and Taine himself would still have been a clerk in the service of some contractor of the old regime instead of being able the blacken the revolution that opened a new career to him.

Trotsky then applied this perspective to the Russian Revolution:

A still greater historical perspective is necessary to view the October revolution. Only hopeless dullards can quote as evidence against it the fact that in twelve years it has not yet created general peace and prosperity. If one adopts the scale of the German Reformation and the French Revolution . . . one must express amazement at the fact that a backward and isolated Russia twelve years after the revolution has been able to insure for the masses of the people a standard of living that is not lower that that existing on the eve of the war. That alone is a miracle of its kind. But of course the significance of the October revolution does not lie in that. The revolution is an experiment in a new social regime, an experiment that will undergo many changes and will probably be remade anew from its very foundations. It will assume an entirely different character on the basis of the newest technical achievements. But after a few decades and centuries, the new social order will look back on the October revolution as the bourgeois order does on the German Reformation or the French Revolution. This is so clear, so incontestably clear, that even the professors of history will understand it, though only after many years.

Finally, Trotsky extended this reflection to the significance of his own life:

And what of your personal fate? I hear a question, in which curiosity is mixed with irony . . . Since my exile, I have more than once read musings in the newspapers on the subject of the ‘tragedy’ that has befallen me. I know no personal tragedy. I know the change of two chapters of the revolution. One American paper which published an article of mine accompanied it with a profound note to the effect that in spite of the blows the author has suffered, he had, as evidenced by his article, preserved his clarity
of reason. I can only express my astonishment at the philistine attempt to establish a connection between the power of reasoning and a government post, between mental balance and the present situation. I do not know, and I never have, of any such connection. In prison, with a book or a pen in my hand, I experienced the same sense of deep satisfaction that I did at the mass-meetings of the revolution. I felt the mechanics of power as an inescapable burden, rather than as a spiritual satisfaction. But it would perhaps be briefer to quote the good words of someone else. On January 26, 1917, Rosa Luxemburg wrote to a woman friend from prison: ‘This losing oneself completely in the banalities of daily life is something that I generally cannot understand or endure. See, for example, how Goethe rose above material things with a calm superiority. Just think of what he had to live through: the great French Revolution, which at near range must have seemed a bloody and utterly aimless farce, and then from 1793 to 1815, a continuous sequence of wars. I do not demand that you write poetry as Goethe did, but his view of life, the universality of his interests, the inner harmony of the man, every one can create for himself or at least strive for. And should you say that Goethe was not a political fighter, I maintain that it is precisely the fighter who must try to be above things, or else he will get his nose stuck in all sorts of rubbish—of course, in this case, I am thinking of a fighter in the grand style . . . ’ Brave words. I read them for the first time the other day, and they immediately brought the figure of Rosa Luxemburg closer and made her dearer to me than ever before.172

The 1939 debate with Burnham and Shachtman concluded with a split within the Socialist Workers Party.173 Burnham, as if to prove Trotsky’s accusations about his petty-bourgeois orientation, retreated from political life into academia. He quickly broke with Marxism and wrote a best-selling book arguing that the Soviet Union was a new type of “managerial society,” the harbinger of a global tendency that would eventually transcend both capitalism and socialism. To the extent that the hysterical spouting of right-wing Armageddon fantasies from a safe spot qualifies, Burnham returned to political action in the late 1940s, when he became a vociferous advocate of a preventive nuclear strike against the Soviet Union.174 Shachtman remained active in “socialist” politics, though of a very peculiar sort. Having formed his own party, he became fiercely anti-communist, ending up as the enthusiastic “left” cheerleader for American imperialism during the Vietnam War.

The political fate of these two figures provides a sense of how dangerous and delicate a process Trotsky’s high-wire act was at the level of political practice. I have examined this episode to discuss the broader significance of
Trotsky’s political opposition as well. Trotsky did not get to make another revolution. Trotskyism remained a small movement, whether measured internationally, or country by country. Trotsky’s insistence on the significance of a long-term perspective proved to be a small personal consolation, at least in the sense famously elucidated by John Maynard Keynes. But the full long-term significance of the movement created by Trotsky remains to be determined, as it remains an open political question. It is certainly possible to say with a measure of confidence that Trotsky was able to preserve something of the progressive and heroic part of the legacy of Marxism and the Russian Revolution, and that he did so not merely in a series of texts, but as embodied in living political forces—the number of people and organizations informed and inspired by his legacy. More than that, one could venture to say that just as Trotsky’s insistence on the possibility of a capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union appeared to be self-evidently wrong before 1991, in the same way, on the question of the significance of Trotsky’s struggle to build a political movement, history might still have a few surprises in store.

In any case, the value of Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinism is no mere matter of sociological precision concerning the characteristics of a long-deceased social system. It is not the same as, for example, Perry Anderson’s sparkling dissection of European feudalism. The value of Trotsky’s analysis is forward-looking as well. The process of the transition to socialism was not ended once and for all by the collapse of the USSR. The current political conditions (the escalation of imperialist conflicts across the globe, the ongoing collapse of the post-World War II social model in the advanced capitalist countries, the continuing political and economic crises in the ex-Third World) and the truly remarkable decay of political forces that appeared to function as alternatives to the most savage and unfettered play of free-market capitalism (European social-democracy, American liberalism, Third-World nationalism, each seemingly engaged in an indecorous effort to outpace the others in this process) all suggest that many of the questions widely thought to have been settled once and for all should be reconsidered, and that those who had filed away the question of the transition to socialism as some historical curiosity, next to the fate of the medieval kingly suzerainty and the commutation of feudal dues into money rents, will have to take a fresh and honest look at it. Something similar is also suggested by Trotsky’s account of the long travail of the bourgeois-democratic revolutions and the necessity to understand the problem of the transition to socialism from the perspective of the long durée. This is not something that can be proven here, although I trust that the unfolding of the present political situation will continue to powerfully educate all of us on this matter. In any case, for those who
believe that the epochal prospects for revolutionary events are not exhausted, the significance of Stalinism as a phenomenon cannot be considered to be exhausted either. The same processes constitutive of Stalinism according to Trotsky's analysis—bureaucratization, a narrow national reorientation, one-man dictatorship, etc.—are instead a potential recurring danger in any post-revolutionary situation. In this sense, Trotsky's legacy is important because it mapped out these processes and their root causes with remarkable insight, while at the same time constructing a principled political alternative to them. To the extent that Marxism exists as a political tradition, Trotsky's legacy is a permanent conquest and resource for it, not a matter of antiquarian interest.

In conclusion, it is certainly true that the expulsion from the Soviet Union forcefully removed Trotsky from the center-stage of history. Today's prevailing silence over the significance of his legacy is a reminder of the force of this removal. But this event did not dampen his extraordinary energies and critical faculties. His opposition to Stalinism was of the highest moral character without resorting to facile moralizing. It was attentive to each tactical contingency, but never lost sight of the broad movement of history. Considering the terrible personal and political pressures constantly applied against him, the precipitous fall from power, and the general disorientation of the epoch, it was a remarkable feat of political balance, a lasting model of political theory and practice. In our own grotesquely unsteady political times, it is up to us to learn from it.
Chapter Six
Conclusion

One's critical self-awareness occurs . . . through a struggle of political ‘hegemonies,’ of contrasting directions, first in the realm of ethics, then in politics, arriving at a superior elaboration of one's conception of the real. To be conscious of being part of a specific hegemonic force (that is, political consciousness) is the first phase toward a further and progressive self-awareness in which theory and practice finally become one . . . the unity of theory and practice is therefore not a mechanical, predetermined fact, but a process of historical becoming.¹

My audience was composed of workers, soldiers, hard-working mothers, street urchins—the oppressed under-dogs of the capital. Every square inch was filled, every human body compressed to its limit . . . The balconies threatened to fall under the excessive weight of human bodies. I made my way to the platform through a narrow human trench, sometimes I was borne overhead. The air, intense with breathing and waiting . . . exploded with shouts and with the passionate yells peculiar to the Modern Circus. Above and around me was a press of elbows, chests, and heads. I spoke from out of a warm cavern of human bodies; whenever I stretched out my hands I would touch someone, and a grateful movement in response would give me to understand that I was not to worry about it, not to break off my speech, but keep on . . . They wanted to know, to understand, to find their way. At times it seemed as if I felt, with my lips, the stern inquisitiveness of this crowd that had become merged into a single whole. Then all the arguments and words thought out in advance would break and recede under the imperative pressure of sympathy. And other words, other arguments, utterly unexpected by the orator but needed by these people, would emerge in full array from my subconsciousness. On such occasions I felt as if I were listening to the speaker from the outside, trying to keep pace with his ideas, afraid
In 1914, on the eve of World War I, Georgi Plekhanov was known as the “Pope” of Russian Marxism. His authority and reputation as a theoretician was unrivalled. He had translated the *Communist Manifesto* into Russian, authored a seminal work on the role of the individual in history, and conducted a fierce and successful attack against of the theories of Narodnik populism in Russia and Eduard Bernstein’s revisionism abroad. Plekhanov was at the center of the development of Marxism as a political movement in Russia from its inception. He was one of the founders of Emancipation of Labor, the first Marxist organization in Russia, and subsequently a towering figure of the Russian Social-Democratic Party who participated in all of its developmental stages from a position of leadership.

In 1929, the Italian Communist Ignazio Silone set to work on a book on the origins and development of fascism. Silone was to become internationally famous as the author of some extraordinary novels, especially *Fontamara* and *Bread and Wine*. His analysis of fascism, which was the product of years of political work in the Italian Communist Party, but also of a refusal to submit to the crude approach enforced by Stalinism on the matter, was remarkable as well. As a work of theory, the book was able to explain the complex social roots of fascism—not just the obvious links with the bourgeoisie, landowners, and the church, but the significant mass appeal it found among the peasantry, the petty bourgeoisie, and war veterans as well. Furthermore, Silone was able to explain the paradoxical political behavior of fascism—from the hysterical socialistic revolutionary claims of its early stages, to the total destruction of every form of working class organization and the legislative reverence for private property once in power. The book also had a significant impact on the politics of the day. After its original publication in German in 1934, it became a powerful practical weapon against fascism, exposing the contradictions and ridiculous posturing of Mussolini’s regime in brilliant and incisive fashion, and by extension, Hitler’s as well.

In 1956, after Nikita Khrushchev’s shocking revelations put an end to the quivering silence over the brutalities of Stalin’s rule, a powerful voice rose from within the Communist world to demand a radicalization of the exposures and explanations provided at the twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Palmiro Togliatti, the leader of the Italian Communist Party, pointed out that Khrushchev’s explanation of what had occurred was inadequate because it merely reversed the terms of Stalin’s cult of personality. While before all that was good and socialist was said to

*that, like a somnambulist, he might fall off the edge of the roof at the sound of my conscious reasoning.*
be due to Stalin’s efforts and leadership, now all the mistakes, failures, and crimes of the past were being conveniently laid at his feet. In his perceptive analysis of Stalinism, Togliatti explained that this phenomenon had to be understood far more broadly. It was not the result of the madness or brutality of a single man, but the product of wider, systemic forces, which included Russia’s backwardness before the revolution, its political isolation, and the consequent growth of a powerful and oppressive bureaucracy.5

One of the guiding principles of this book has been the insistence on a closer correspondence between political theory and practice. This is true, as I have argued, in terms of the kind of texts deemed suitable for interpretation, the way in which these texts are interpreted, and the position and political self-awareness of the interpreter as well. More than that, in discussing a particular pair of Marxist theorists, this argument is predicated on the need to take seriously the old Marxist axiom about the unity of theory and practice.

This formula, however, is far from self-sufficient and conceals many complications and difficulties. To begin, when it appears simply as an abstract formula, this unity of theory and practice remains of course fully contained in the plane of theory—that is, it remains mere, self-contradicting theory. The unity of theory and practice cannot therefore exist as an abstract formula found in a text. To be a self-consistent and genuinely active element, it must, at a minimum, be embodied in an actual thinking and acting person. This person, moreover, cannot embody such unity in conditions of social and political isolation, but must be a consciously functioning part of a larger whole—a class and a political organization.6

In this sense, the cases of Plekhanov, Silone, and Togliatti could all be used to exemplify the Marxist unity of theory and practice. All three applied their theoretical faculties, ranging from competent (Togliatti) to formidable (Plekhanov), to some difficult and pressing problems generated by actual political life, producing insightful results. They were politically active, engaged in the sort of disciplined and collective intellectual work characteristic of the Marxist tradition. All of them, moreover, were involved in actual political struggle, often under very difficult conditions. They had all been exiles at one point or another, operating for a long time in illegal or semi-legal conditions while working toward revolutionary change. As concrete examples of the Marxist unity of political theory and practice, however, the stories of Plekhanov, Silone, and Togliatti can be thoroughly misleading. Beneath the superficially agreeable unity of theory and practice they seem to embody lurk some unsettling complications.

Plekhanov began to lose his political bearings exactly as the revolutionary crisis in Russia matured. Already in 1905 his reputation had been
somewhat tarnished as a result of his passivity and inclination to distrust and reproach the initiative of the masses, who were not inclined to follow the theoretical script he had prepared for them. The onset of World War I saw this hitherto proud and eminent revolutionary internationalist raise his voice in support of the carnage and do his best to generate a popular rally in defense of the fatherland. Plekhanov supported first the tsarist regime, then the bourgeois provisional government in the war effort. Every turn of the revolutionary crisis found him on the right wing, acting as a break, sounding alarms, denouncing the irresponsible and the unpatriotic. As the political ground shifted from under him, Plekhanov helplessly found himself, in spite of his best intentions, in increasingly disturbing company.

Silone had been a police spy since 1919, first for the Italian monarchy, and then for the fascist regime once it came to power. At the time he wrote his book on that very subject, Silone was still a spy for the fascist regime. In fact, historically he played a crucial role in the systematic disorganization and defeat of the Communist Party at the hands of the regime. Silone’s steady stream of intelligence information was an extraordinarily important resource to the regime, and Mussolini himself took a personal interest in it. His treachery was directly responsible for the fate of many Italian Communists who were arrested, jailed, and worse. Living in the same political circles, he happened to know many of those people personally as friends and comrades. As a great asset to the regime, Silone was of course himself protected from arrest and persecution.

Togliatti had been an active, committed supporter of Stalinism from its beginning in the struggles that shook the communist movement in the 1920s. As we have seen in chapter three, in 1926, when the time came to intervene and vote on the elimination of the Left Opposition, Togliatti played a leading role in this process as a Comintern delegate. Once he returned to Italy, in his new position as the head the PCI, Togliatti replicated some of the administrative measures that characterized Stalinism in the Soviet Union. Closely and obediently following the orders coming from Moscow, he conducted a fierce campaign against various oppositions and deviations, supervising, for example, the bloody reprisals against non-Stalinist fighters in the Spanish Civil War. In a more general sense, moreover, Togliatti had accepted the strategic turn toward socialism in one country, the strict subordination of the Comintern and each national section to Moscow, and had done much to link the cause of socialism to Stalin’s personal fame and fortune, even during the years of the debasing cult of personality.

It should be noted that from a psychological standpoint Plekhanov, Silone, and Togliatti were not criminals and traitors in an uncomplicated
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sense. Complex and powerful processes similar to the “cannibalism” discussed by Gramsci in his notebooks affected them, wreaking havoc on their individual consciences and political instincts. Plekhanov remained formally a socialist until his death. His alienation from the actual revolutionary movement resulted not simply from a personal failure, but was one instance of a wider phenomenon. The unfolding of the revolutionary process in a way that defied long established schemes and expectations opened a vast generational chiasm that devoured thousands of the old, outstanding figures of the Second International. Silone, in two separate compartments of his own mind, simultaneously spied for and fought against fascism. The correspondence with his police handler is indicative of the complexity and contradictions of his state of mind. The tortured character of his choices can also be recognized retrospectively in some of the most poignant passages of his novels dealing with political deceit and betrayal. Similarly, in the terrible years of Stalinist rampage, Togliatti no doubt thought he was doing what he had to in order save the party, his comrades, and, yes, himself. In all cases, in spite of the astounding scale of betrayals, complicity, and disorientation, there still remained an element of lingering commitment. To the end these men believed they were fighting for socialism.

The real significance of these three examples, therefore, is to illustrate the considerable and even horrific complications that can lurk beneath a formal Marxist unity of theory and practice. In all three cases, the theoretical contribution was significant and formally correct, as well as meaningfully connected to serious, organized form of political practice. My approach to Gramsci and Trotsky has certainly emphasized this unity. Concerning Gramsci, I have joined the Marxist attempts to reclaim him for a specific political tradition of activism and organization. I have offered a contribution to the critique of those misguided or tendentious projects that seek to seamlessly slip Gramsci into the circuits of academic theory, to valorize and celebrate him to the degree that his theoretical contribution can be separated from his antiquated, and in any case irrelevant, forms of political practice. From this standpoint, it is no small irony that the same conditions that Gramsci regarded as handicaps when imposed on him by the prison regime (political isolation, a perverse form of disinterestedness, the regimentation of one’s thinking by a depoliticizing routine), are exactly the sort of things that make him, at least in his prison years, recognizable today as a valuable fellow theorist. In Trotsky’s case, I have attempted to show that he is for the most part ignored because the same sorts of operations are far more difficult to accomplish in his case. The Marxist unity of theory and practice embodied by Trotsky is less fractured and more resistant to manipulation.
But here as in the case of Plekhanov, Silone, and Togliatti, simply calling attention to the importance of political practice is an insufficient and potentially dangerous move. It is not enough simply to reattach or factor in “practice” in the process of assessing “theory.” In the case of Gramsci in particular, while criticizing the existing projects of Marxist revaluations, I have shown the dangerous pitfalls found on the way to a recovery of an “activist” Gramsci. In the case of Trotsky, while an appreciation of the active and practical aspects of his legacy is important, this is also a difficult and treacherous process. I have had to defend this unity of theory and practice, for example, against certain strands of “Trotskyism” that attempt to discount the political and organizational work of Trotsky’s later period. In all cases, it is not possible to correct the prevailing orientation toward a truncated theory by hastily and uncritically appending elements of political practice to it. Moreover, an appreciation of political practice can itself become the source of other kinds of difficulties and distortions. It can be diverted into yet another kind of “methodism” for academic consumption—a mere procedure for interpreting texts. It can also lead to the outright hostility to theory as such, and to the glorification of political practice as a good in itself, independently of the historical possibilities and political merits it expresses.

It is from this last standpoint—the insufficiency of activism for its own sake—that I have focused on the problem of Stalinism. Thematically, this was the central political problem that dominated the period of the 1920s and 1930s being discussed here. The point of returning to those times and that particular problem, however, was not simply to examine an episode of interest from the standpoint of the history of political thought. It was to return to the time when the Marxist tradition splintered and exhausted its propulsive force, politically as well as theoretically. The contemporary standing of Marxism as an uncomplicated, self-evidently surpassed tradition, as the helpless punching bag for post-Marxists of all stripes, should be understood as an unfortunate reverberation from that period.

One of the most powerful arguments that has been advanced to elucidate the lasting significance of the 1920s and 1930s is Perry Anderson’s Considerations on Western Marxism. In going back to that period, I have attempted to flesh out the argument made by Anderson about the fracture between Western and Eastern Marxism that occurred at the time. The former became afflicted by congenital pessimism, started to speak in tongues, and retreated into the comfortable isolation of the university. It turned into truncated “theory,” increasingly produced by and for academics. In the “East,” Marxism was instead reduced to pure practice of an unthinking and criminal sort. The personal victory of Stalin in the 1920s was itself the
victory of the party “practicals,” of the limited, provincial know-nothings of Communism. Theory existed in the “East” only as the flimsy and quite ridiculous cover for the various twists and turns in policy decided by bureaucrats and tyrants whose political horizons did not extend past their nose. Stalinism played a role not just, as is obvious, in the degeneration of Eastern Marxism, but in that of the Western branch as well. This is true directly, because Stalinism acted as the organizer of defeats in Western Europe, as in the cases of France, Italy, and Greece. But it is also true in a less direct sense, as the indefensible, totalitarian specter always haunting the minds of Western sympathizers and believers.

Framing the question of the standing of the Marxist tradition in this way enables a reconsideration of the terms that were initially established by Western Marxism, and then re-elaborated more decisively by post-Marxism—failure, complicity, obsolescence, and lack of sophistication. It is in fact the latter tradition that should be understood the predictable and politically vaporous by-product of more concrete defeats suffered earlier. The prevailing cultured pessimism and critical criticism, and the corresponding creeping adaptation to liberal democracy, particularly at a time of its decay, need not be accepted as the best we can do. But working our way out of the present impasse necessitates a traditionalist orientation—a reconsideration of the period I discussed, focusing not simply on the lasting, paralyzing effects of Stalinism, but also on the possibility that a valuable Marxist political alternative could have existed against and in spite of the Stalinist degeneration. To seriously re-examine the political and ethical content of the Marxist tradition, to unpack that simple and convenient foil of post-Marxism, requires not just coming to terms with the lasting significance of Stalinism, but also being able to identify a political opposition, an alternative Marxist tradition that clearly understood this process of degeneration and fought it in a principled manner. This is not a form of escapism from the urgent, ongoing constructive projects of the present. To think and act politically today is to do so among ruins, and not just those of the Marxist tradition. When the present consists of rubble and dust, one would do well to think back to what happened in the past before merrily resuming construction.

Looking back, it might be possible to identify a politically healthy and honorable strand of theoretical and practical continuity. It is in this sense that Gramsci and Trotsky can assume a special significance. With some important qualifications, Anderson also pointed to Gramsci and Trotsky as the paradigmatic figures of the two strands of Marxism after its fracture. I have attempted to expand on and corroborate Anderson’s argument in this sense as well. With Anderson, I have sought to disrupt the prevailing common
sense about the relative importance of these figures. In Gramsci’s case, I have attempted to show that, even when rescued from the grasp of contemporary academic appropriations, in the end one finds some decisive limits. To the extent that the Gramsciological escapades of academics have dovetailed into recognizable political currents, these have been variants of social democracy and democratic socialism, as in the case of Laclau, Mouffe, Sassoon, Przeworski, and West, among others. Ranging from conscious to oblivious, these are all attempts to corral Gramsci into the same camp he bitterly fought against during his own time. This sort of Gramsciology must be rejected as inaccurate and tendentious. But even a “Gramscism” reconstructed from the standpoint of the kind of political practice he actually embodied would badly stumble on the question of Stalinism. A detailed and concrete assessment of Gramsci’s own thinking and acting in the shadow of Stalinism reveals some disturbing problems. Gramsci’s relationship with Stalinism in the phase of its consolidation, as I have shown in chapter three, is ambiguous and troubling, though certainly not to the same extent as Togliatti’s. His understanding of the phenomenon in the Notebooks, moreover, is marred by substantial gaps. This is not to argue that Gramsci is to be completely discarded. On the contrary, some elements Gramsci’s legacy—hegemony, the role of intellectuals, transformism, “southernism,” and more—can certainly be a powerful contribution to a project of revitalization of Marxism. But a “Gramscist” turn in the fullest sense is inadvisable.

I have attempted to show, instead, that it is a turn toward Trotsky that can serve as the pivot for a revitalization of Marxism as a theoretical and political force. His contributions at the level of theory are vastly underrated. Trotsky’s remarkable and multifaceted analysis of Stalinism discussed in chapter five is but one instance of a broader array of contributions. The record of his political behavior in the shadow of Stalinism is exemplary as well. Even a generous interpretation of the pre-prison Gramsci would find in his actions and inactions only a very peculiar kind of opposition. To the extent that he opposed Stalinism, he did so as an individual, confined to his own hesitations and quite limited capacity to maneuver, to drag his feet, to deflect the force of official Stalinist policy in a safer direction. The character of Trotsky’s opposition was instead not just of a different ethical order, but collectively and consciously organized as well. Indeed “Trotsky” often stands in this book as in history as a convenient shorthand for a group of people across countries and continents who were able to clearly recognize Stalinism for what it was, to give it its proper name, and fight it accordingly. Particularly in this expanded sense, Trotsky stands as the best available embodiment of that complex and fragile thing that is the Marxist unity of theory and practice.
The challenge posed by him should be taken seriously because what is at stake, in its merits as a theoretical legacy and political alternative, is the entire set of commonplaces that organize the way in which we think about Marxism, the Soviet Union, and their combined influence on the tragic unfolding of twentieth-century history: the totalitarian and undemocratic character of Bolshevism; the class orientation and political behavior of the Soviet Union in the international sphere; and its continuing commitment to the principles laid out by Marx and Lenin. Whether we acknowledge it or not, these questions still cast a long shadow over us. Out of this shadow, Trotsky emerges a world-historical figure—for our times.
NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

3. For example, in 2003 *U.S. News & World Report* published a special edition titled “Secrets of Genius,” which identified and discussed Marx, along with Freud and Einstein, as the greatest minds of the twentieth century. This bold choice required some humorous contortions to reconcile praise for Marx’s intellect with a predictable indictment of the failed and criminal political movement it produced.
5. To evoke the most striking moment of an episode that remains today largely undigested in terms of its historical significance, the Supreme Court’s ruling boldly stated that American citizens have no constitutional right to vote for electors for the President of the United States.
6. This is not written in the spirit of romanticizing the earlier incarnations of liberalism. These were also infused with their own forms of political hypocrisy, one of which I will have the opportunity to discuss in chapter four. But it is difficult to consider the latest developments without noticing a marked turn for the worse.
7. “PM says British Raj was Beneficial,” July 9, 2005. http://us.rediff.com/news/2005/jul/09pm1.htm. Once again, this is not to romanticize the earlier history of the Congress Party. Particularly in its initial period, from 1885 until the late 1920s, it had expounded moderate positions. But even a passing familiarity with the Nehruvian legacy of the independence movement and early postcolonial India would allow one to recognize the shameful character of the recent turn and of Singh’s statement in particular.


10. On page 47, Chakrabarty states, “one cannot afford to ignore Marx.” But the point seems exactly to transcend him by way of Heidegger. See for example his discussion of “History 1” and “History 2” in *Provincializing Europe*, pp. 62–71.

11. The death of Marx’s “old mole” as a model for revolutionary struggles is one example of the many ways in which, according to Hardt and Negri, the radically new character of the present epoch should compel us to move beyond the traditional forms of political analysis and struggle advocated by Marx. Hardt and Negri, p. 57. For a battery of statements heralding the obsolescence of the old approaches in the face of “empire,” see Hardt and Negri, pp. 222, 298, 304, 322, 323, 324, 349, 393. As in the case of Chakrabarty, this is not an outright rejection or denunciation of Marx, but an attempt to point out his inadequacy in the face of both new theoretical developments and new conditions.

12. “Marx is no longer of necessity the theorist of proletarian revolution, inevitably burdened with the ideas and needs of those who came after. Rather he can now come into his own as the premier critical theorist of commercial society.” Terrell Carver, *The Postmodern Marx* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), pp. 1–2. “We would be tempted to distinguish the *spirit* of the Marxist critique, which seems to be more indispensable than ever today, at once from Marxism as ontology, philosophical or metaphysical system, as ‘dialectical materialism,’ from Marxism as historical materialism or method, and from Marxism incorporated in the apparatuses of party, State, or workers’ International.” Derrida, p. 68.
13. “An important concern of this reinterpretation has been to show the extent to which significant differences exist between Marx’s theory and traditional Marxist interpretations. Indeed, I have shown that Marx’s theory can provide a powerful critique of such interpretation.” Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 383.

14. The adherents of the self-proclaimed “post-Marxist” strand of academic thought treat the actual interpretation of Marx’s text as a macabre ritual best left to those whom they label, right in the middle of a long pontification about the evils of polemics, the “fading epigones of Marxist orthodoxy.” Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, “Postmarxism without Apologies” *New Left Review* 166 (November-December 1987), p. 81. Similarly, Stuart Sim, in his *Post Marxism, An Intellectual History*, informs us that it is important for the “post-Marxist” to “avoid being dragged into those interminable internal debates,” and that his work “steers clear of direct engagement with Marx himself.” Stuart Sim, *Post Marxism: An Intellectual History* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 3.

15. I wish to mention two examples of the sheer oddity and naïveté of this literature, whenever it attempts to translate its theoretical flourishes into political terms. Chakrabarty engages in some impossible contortions in attempting to find any sort of concrete, or at least coherent, political expressions of his ideas. Having earlier endorsed “with some passion” something called “the politics of despair,” he later declares to have renounced it. Chakrabarty, p. 46. It is difficult to determine which of the two—the affirmation of the “politics of despair” or the retreat from it (what would a fallback position from “despair” look like?)—is more politically vaporous. Next, Laclau and Mouffe, in their preface to *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* bemoan the call to resurrect class struggle as wrongheaded, and then express their dismay at the European “Left” for its insistence on “occupying the centre.” Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. xix. This is ironic because, to the extent that it can be read politically, Laclau and Mouffe’s work is clearly an attempt to sound a retreat from the sort of positions (class analysis, political allegiance to the working class, revolution, etc.) that, leaving aside the question of their propriety and effectiveness, should be easily recognized as situated on left, and not the “center” of the political spectrum. In other words, Laclau and Mouffe complain about the social democratization (and worse) of the European left, while at the same time doing what they can, as theoreticians, to push it in that same direction.

17. Ibid., pp. 43–4.
20. Ibid., p. 45. Emphasis in the original.
21. A fuller case in favor of this proposition would require, to begin, a discussion of the political biography of such theorists. In Stuart Hall’s case, his reflections on the failure and defeat of what he calls “the Left,” in England would be a useful place to start. Stuart Hall, “The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists,” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988). Chantal Mouffe, as a student of Eric Hobsbawm, must have been influenced by this living example of the demoralization and social democratization of the old Stalinist milieu, and no doubt absorbed certain practical political lessons from that experience. More generally, one should consider Perry Anderson’s important reflections on contemporary post-Marxist theory as the product of political defeats and isolation. See Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998) and *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: NLB, 1977). It would also be necessary to discuss the specificity of the academic setting, and its own peculiar way of refracting the experiences of political life and enforcing individualism and isolation.
22. Two recent examples are the campaign to ban the hammer and sickle symbol in the European Union as a response to the proposal to ban the Nazi swastika, and the controversy sparked by Bush’s visit to Moscow on the 60th anniversary of the Allied victory in World War II. For an example of the editorial outrage of the *Wall Street Journal* over the recrudescence of the old questions about the evil of communism that were supposed to have been settled once and for all, see David Satter, “What Gulag?” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 8, 2005.
25. To be clear, while I would insist that it is always necessary to analyze and register differences within a particular movement or party, and even within academic tendencies, my argument is not that such differences are always politically decisive. For example, while I believe that certain differences internal to international communism beginning from the 1920s constitute a crucial, and in fact world-historical political distinction, I would not make the same claim about the differences that existed between, in descending order of importance, Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, John Kerry and Dennis Kucinich, or Stuart Hall and Cornel West.
26. In the case of Hardt and Negri's work, Gramsci is only a marginal presence. Gramsci is also not discussed at all in Chakrabarty's book, but this is a conspicuous absence. In the tradition of subaltern studies, of which Provincializing Europe is the unfortunate culmination, Gramsci is a central figure.

27. Some scholars have posed the question of the revitalization of Marxism in a similar way, and called for a return to a particular figure of classical Marxism. For example, Stephen Bronner and Norman Geras have insisted on the importance of Rosa Luxemburg, while Stephen Cohen chose Bukharin. See Stephen Eric Bronner, Socialism Unbound (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2001); Norman Geras, The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg (London: Verso, 1983); and Stephen F. Cohen, Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). Recently there has also been a vociferous call for a return to Lenin. See Slavoj Žižek, “What Can Lenin Tell Us About Freedom Today?” Rethinking Marxism 13, no. 2 (2001), pp. 1–9. Žižek's praise of Lenin, however, even leaving aside its truncated and tendentious character, seems to me more of a provocation intended for an easily scandalized academic public than a serious political reconsideration.

28. The same could be said of some of Marx's lesser known works, such as his “March 1850 Address” and his political correspondence.

29. As I will explain in the next chapter, this perception is mistaken.

30. Richard Ashcraft, “On the Problem of Methodology and the Nature of Political Theory,” Political Theory 3, no. 1 (1975), p. 13. Similarly, but with reference to Thomas Kuhn's model of scientific revolution: “The result is the latter are described in political language, but their actual relationship to political, social, and economic developments is omitted from this ‘historical’ account of science. And it is precisely this metaphorical characterization of science which those who write about political theory have adopted as their own.” Ashcraft, p. 14.


32. Ashcraft attacked the kind of “political theory which remains preoccupied with ‘understanding’ political theory, apparently as an end in itself,” and “those whose objection to the identification of political theory with ideology rests upon some principled defense of the former as being somehow ‘higher’ and more removed from the tawdry conflicts of day-to-day political life than the latter.” Ashcraft, pp. 16, 20. Of course the appearance of contemplation and of standing above politics does not prevent one from advancing a definite political agenda in ways that are less than forthcoming. The Cambridge School's assault against the so-called “Macpherson thesis” regarding seventeenth-century English political thought represents an instructive case, for it was initially couched strictly and innocently in methodological terms. Yet Quentin Skinner's intimation to “learn to do our own thinking for ourselves” could have been recognized as a deliberate political move to fend off
C.B. Macpherson’s critique of the historical roots of liberalism. Only later, in the introduction and chapter two of James Tully’s *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts*—a rather unflattering epitaph for Macpherson and his thesis—was the conscious political dimension of the debate revealed. Leaving aside the question of its merits and seriousness, Skinner also eventually had a few things to say about his own political agenda in his *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For a more recent collective report from the Cambridge School in which assurances of specialized detachment and the crude and uninformed classics of anticomunism (“Marx showed overt contempt for peasants and those in what is now called the Third World”) mix freely, see Quentin Skinner, “Political Philosophy: The View from Cambridge,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 10, no 1 (2002), pp. 1–19.

33. Wolin was also attempting to counter the invasion and colonization of the subfield of political theory on the part of the “methodists” who dominated political science. In other words, Wolin tried to fend off an offensive that ultimately aimed to impose the methods of mainstream social science in the subfield of political theory. See Sheldon Wolin, “Political Theory as a Vocation,” in Martin Fleisher, ed. *Machiavelli and the Nature of Political Thought* (New York: Atheneum, 1972), p. 69.

34. Ibid., p. 69.

35. Ibid., p. 65.

36. Ibid., pp. 65–66.

37. Ibid., p. 66. Emphasis in the original. It should be noted that with his intervention Wolin was also attempting to shake up what he considered to be the appalling complacency of a discipline that was merrily perfecting abstruse quantitative techniques at a time of explosive political crises.

38. Ibid., p. 71.


40. A recent work by Patrick McGovern demonstrates all of these points with remarkable insight and precision, arguing that since the publication of Wolin’s article the discipline has steered clear of epic theory. See Patrick McGovern, “The Trial of Scopes: Perestroika, Epic Political Theory, and the Dominance of Method.” *New Political Science* 27, no. 2 (June 2005), pp. 199–214.


NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO


4. I use “Gramsciology” here in a pejorative sense, referring to those academic uses and users of Gramsci who fundamentally detach his political theory from his political practice and do so either as a conscious ideological maneuver, or simply drift in that direction by following various disciplinary and institutional parameters. For an interesting critique of “Marxology” along these lines see August Nimtz’s excellent Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000).


6. Timothy Brennan, “Antonio Gramsci and Post-Colonial Theory: ‘Southernism,’” Diaspora 10, no. 2 (Fall 2001), pp. 143–187. The immediate target of Brennan’s critique is postcolonial theory. Nonetheless, Brennan’s argument directly confronts wide sections of academic discourse, including Louis Althusser, Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe, along with several thinkers more conventionally recognized as “postcolonial.”


8. “It is remarkable, even inexplicable, that the varied philological scholarship that hitherto had been so important played absolutely no role in the postcolonial Gramsci.” Brennan, p. 152. Emphasis in the original. The ongoing publication of Joseph Buttigieg’s complete critical edition of the prison notebooks in the English language might abate some of these tendencies. However, as the Marxist critique being discussed here makes clear, these tendencies spring from powerful ideological undercurrents, not merely from technical problems of language and availability.

9. Ibid., pp. 149, 150. Brennan usefully notes how this philological deficit, caused in large part by the prominence of a different “ethical/aesthetic” tradition of Althusserian inspiration, flies in the face of Gramsci’s own methodological predilections. Ibid., pp. 150, 157. While Brennan and Anderson appeal to philology in order to reclaim Gramsci for Marxism, critiques of the contemporary uses of the Italian thinker have been also been levied simply from the standpoint of a methodologically correct history of ideas. Richard Bellamy, for example, chastises Stuart Hall’s appropriation of Gramsci as anachronistic, insisting instead on the specificity of Gramsci as an Italian

10. For an incisive version of this complaint, issued specifically against Michel Foucault, see Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), p. 228. While Walzer recognizes the peculiarity and limits of the academic intellectual, he is not inclined to think that it is possible to remain a “critic” and “intellectual” while acting as a member of a disciplined political organization. Walzer projects his own anxieties onto Gramsci, finding “his view of the role of the party and of the place of intellectuals like himself in political life” to be “painfully unresolved.” Walzer, p. 81. In the end, Walzer can thus appreciate Gramsci, uneasily and ambiguously, only to the extent that he can be separated from his active political commitments.

11. Brennan, p. 144. Joseph Femia provides one example of this fixation with his dismissal of Gramsci’s political and journalistic work: “His pre-prison work was, for the most part, the ephemeral outpouring of the political diatribist and pamphleteer . . . the articles and editorials published before 1926 do not comprise a significant body of theory.” See Joseph V. Femia, “Gramsci’s Patrimony,” *British Journal of Political Science* 13, no. 3 (July 1983), p. 328.


13. “When he started his theoretical explorations in prison, he seems to have taken them so much for granted that they scarcely ever figure directly in his discourse at all. They form, as it were the familiar acquisition, which no longer needed reiteration, in an intellectual enterprise whose energies were concentrated elsewhere—on the discovery of the unfamiliar . . . he never intended to deny or rescind the classical axioms of that tradition.” Anderson, “The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci,” pp. 46–47.

14. Ibid., p. 49.

15. Ibid., pp. 17–18.


17. Ibid., pp. 58–59. For a detailed reconstruction of the extensive debates in the communist movement on the necessity for a differential political analysis and strategy specific to the West, see Andrea Catone, “Gramsci, la rivoluzione russa e la rivoluzione in Occidente” in A. Burgio and A. Santucci (eds.), *Gramsci e la rivoluzione in Occidente* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1999), pp. 48–68.

18. “Accustomed as we are to the celebration of singularity, the collective character of this movement today sparks controversy, and would be denied by
those invested in preserving Gramsci’s autonomous authority.” Brennan, p. 162.

19. “In his lifetime, no one understood Gramsci to be an author—someone who created ideas requiring exegetical effort. Seeing him in this way required the work of now largely forgotten people from the 1940s. Already dead by 1937, with Mussolini still firmly in power, Gramsci the writer and thinker was the posthumous product of allies from the Communist movement who arranged his notes, thematically ordered them, reconstructed his booklists, and saved the manuscripts from destruction by spiriting them away to the Soviet Union where they were first carefully edited.” Ibid., p. 146.

20. “Gramsci’s major superstructural themes (as well as his economic ones) emerged from editorial decisions made by intellectuals from the Italian Communist Party (PCI) . . . So although it may come as a surprise to some, we have to reckon with the historical fact that the emphases on culture, on civil society, and on the role of intellectuals were constructed and highlighted by Gramsci’s communist redactors. It was their perspective, not that of a later generation of skeptical readers intent on reading him ‘against the grain’ of his communist affiliations.” Ibid., pp. 146–147.

21. “First . . . hegemony . . . characterized the general stage of Marxist theory in Gramsci’s time. It was not, in other words, Gramsci’s unique insight. Second . . . economism . . . was already a pejorative within the Third International . . . Clearly, neither Gramsci nor his movement thought of him as heterodox. He published his largely uncontroversial views in voluminous quantities of journalistic writing and intra-Party circulars before 1926 . . . they too believed as he did . . . The distinction . . . between Gramsci and the numerous and nameless party functionaries in Germany, Italy, or the Soviet Union who spoke uninterestingly of class struggle and the revolutionary party is not a distinction between Marxism and its beyond but between a highly talented and nuanced commentator, on the one hand, and dutiful popularizes or managerial types, on the other (analogous, say, to the distinction between John Rawls and a Democratic Party convention speaker).” Ibid., pp. 162–163.

22. In general, it can be said that Brennan rearticulates and extends Anderson’s critique. Anderson’s essay was directed against two main targets: the Althusserian and the reformist interpretations of Gramsci. Brennan traces how consciously—and more often semiconsciously—contemporary uses of Gramsci draw from these same roots and reproduce both a truncated “theoretical” approach and an implicit, creeping reformism that seeks to assimilate Gramsci to its own limited outlook and operations in the field of “culture” and “civil society.” If in one sense Brennan updates Anderson’s analysis by deploying it on the complex terrain of subaltern studies and British race theory, he also offers several innovative insights of his own. To mention only one, Brennan brilliantly reads Gramsci’s famous essay on the
“Southern question” as a prophetic invective against the very postcolonial milieu that has appropriated it. See Ibid., pp. 171–180.

23. Even Hardt and Negri’s influential Empire, which in most respects slides comfortably into the grooves of post-Marxism, includes the following fierce complaint against Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxist Gramsci: “Poor Gramsci, communist and militant before all else, tortured and killed by fascism and ultimately by the bosses who financed fascism—poor Gramsci was given the gift of being considered the founder of a strange notion of hegemony that leaves no place for a Marxist politics . . . We have to defend ourselves against such generous gifts!” Hardt and Negri, p. 451, fn. 26. Of course Hardt and Negri pair this spirited defense of Gramsci with fulminations against the figure of the “sad, ascetic agent of the Third International.” Ibid., p. 411.


25. “It would be wrong to take the apparent omnipresence of references to Gramsci and the countless echoes of his terminology as evidence of deep knowledge and understanding of his work and his thought.” Buttigieg, p. 138.

26. Buttigieg complains about the “numerous cases, found in texts from which one would expect a modicum of academic rigour, of an improper, inaccurate, uninformed . . . use of gramscian terminology and concepts . . . fruit of a reading that is patently partial, or superficial . . . and of a second, or third-hand knowledge of Gramsci.” Ibid., p. 138.

27. “This is the Gramsci of those non-marxists and anti-marxists who need in some way efficient tools of cultural and social criticism, but, at the same time, need to maintain a distance from the ties between marxist philosophy and political practice. Which Gramsci do they construct? The theoretical Gramsci, detached from that Gramsci who dedicated his life to political action . . . Gramsci as a social critic.” Ibid., p. 142.

28. Buttigieg criticizes “a widespread type of approaches and applications of Gramsci’s thought in which Gramsci is treated as though he was no Marxist or as though his Marxism was not really important and his political commitment were a mere contingency, an extraneous element that can be easily isolated from the rest of his theoretical and philosophical production.” Ibid., p. 142.

29. “If we were to identify a specific goal for gramscian studies, it would be to prevent the gramscian legacy from hardening into a sclerotic academicism,
preserving it as a vital example of the possibility to combine again socialist theory with an effective political practice.” Ibid., p. 148. In general, Buttigieg’s Marxist critique is somewhat more forgiving than Brennan’s. Compare, for instance, their treatment of Stuart Hall’s use of Gramsci: Buttigieg, pp. 146–147 and Brennan, pp. 158–161.

30. That is to say, the political turn would probably not happen at all, as it would fail to pierce through the encrusted, overarching common sense about “Leninism,” the failures of the Russian Revolution, and so on. This might explain why Anderson’s demonstration of the prevailing ignorance about the organic ties between Gramsci’s concepts and the international communist movement, though “philologically” devastating, could be simply shrugged off by Laclau and Mouffe in their seminal book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Unless a politically presentable and viable alternative is clearly identified in the folds of the international communist movement (and invoking the “Third International,” in the face of its Stalinist degeneration during, and certainly after, its Fifth World Congress simply will not do) this merry “theorizing” will continue undaunted. One should not be misled by the fact that Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxism presents itself and the “orthodox” Marxism it claims to overcome mainly as a “philosophical” and “theoretical” object. As discussed in the previous chapter, it is able to do this precisely because it rests on a deeply entrenched political common sense about the bread lines, the gulags, the purges, and so on.


32. Brennan, p. 145. Gramsci already warned against the tendency to first dilute, then harmlessly absorb Marxism: “The old world, while rendering homage to historical materialism, seeks to reduce it to a body of subordinate, secondary criteria that can be incorporated into its . . . general theory.” Cited in Brennan, p. 146. Brennan points out that Gramsci developed this critique through the concept of “transformism”—a concept that, not surprisingly, is now largely ignored. Ibid., p. 146.

33. The Italian party was originally called “Partito Comunista d’Italia, sezione dell’Internazionale comunista” (Pcd’I). On May 15, 1943, it changed its name to “Partito Comunista Italiano” (PCI). For the sake of simplicity, I will only use the latter designation in this work.

34. In this sense, the validity of two aspects of Brennan’s argument needs to be qualified. First, his sharp critique of the prevailing inclinations to read Gramsci “against the grain,” while correct when raised against academic post-Marxism, would be counterproductive as a general statement. As I will show, it has always been necessary to read Gramsci “against the grain” of Stalinist distortions. The same can be said of Brennan’s defense of Gramsci’s “orthodoxy.” While correct when directed against those who would turn him into a post-Marxist, this
position falls once understood in the context of the degeneration of the Third International. As I will show, at certain crucial junctures, Gramsci was deemed so unorthodox by the Stalinists as to be silenced or openly falsified. This can only add to the merits of the Italian revolutionary.


36. All of these extremes, it should be noted, were beyond the pale of the principles established by Lenin’s leadership and the early Comintern. For an incisive account of the concept of Stalinist “zig-zags,” see Leon Trotsky, The Revolution Betrayed (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1991), pp. 19–38. See also Leon Trotsky, The Third International after Lenin (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1996), pp. 131–156.

37. Though I will return to this point in chapter three, it is important to stress here that the Italian leadership was no mere victim of political pressure, but was instead a conscious and active force in the consolidation of Stalinism. Stalinism was a collaborative effort that required political support from abroad. Control of the Comintern and support among non-Russian communist parties was one of the fronts in which Stalinism was able to secure a stranglehold on the communist movement. In this sense Togliatti, Camilla Ravera, and the other Italian leaders who capitulated to Stalinism, were allies who shared political responsibility in spite of occasional doubts, crocodile tears, and the fact that at certain junctures they were themselves in danger of being crushed by Moscow. Other communists, instead, opposed the consolidation of Stalinism, though some more openly and consistently than others. The complex matter of Gramsci’s own record on this question will also be discussed in chapter three.

38. At least two episodes of Gramsci’s prison life, however, have been considered suspect in this regard and remain controversial. The first is the “strange” letter sent by Ruggero Grieco, an émigré leader of the PCI in early 1928, on the eve of Gramsci’s trial. The letter was written in Switzerland, but was taken to Moscow to be stamped and sent from there. This fact, along with some of the incriminating remarks it contained, encouraged some to believe that Gramsci may have been the victim of an intrigue devised by the highest ranks of the Communist leadership. By the end of 1932, Gramsci himself had come to believe that Grieco’s letter might have been the product of such machinations. Perhaps, Gramsci speculated, Grieco had merely been “irresponsibly stupid,” while other individuals—”less stupid” ones—with malicious intent had convinced him to write the letter. See Paolo Spriano’s Gramsci in carcere e il partito (published in English as Antonio Gramsci and the Party: The Prison Years (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979)) for a spirited apology for Togliatti and the PCI on this and other matters. Spriano’s book includes the pertinent letters in appendix. The second episode in question is the June 1930 visit paid by Gennaro Gramsci to his more famous brother in prison. The visit
was requested and organized by the PCI leadership with the alleged purpose of consulting Gramsci on the possible expulsion from the party of three of its leaders (Pietro Tresso, Paolo Ravazzoli and Alfonso Leonetti) in the context of the “third period” turn and the intensification of Stalinist “administrative” measures against dissenters. Gennaro reported to the PCI leaders that Antonio was in complete agreement with the expulsions, which in any case had already occurred before Gennaro’s visit. Gennaro, however, later confessed that his brother was in fact opposed to the expulsions, and that he felt compelled to lie in order to protect Antonio from reprisals. The controversy over this episode was originally sparked by the publication of Giuseppe Fiori’s famous Vita di Antonio Gramsci (published in English as Antonio Gramsci: Life of a Revolutionary (London: Verso, 1990)). For the most recent discussion of these two episodes, which benefits from recently recovered evidence, see Angelo Rossi and Giuseppe Vacca, Gramsci tra Mussolini e Stalin (Roma: Fazi, 2007), pp. 56–103. Many allegations about other troubling episodes in the relationship between Gramsci and the PCI have also circulated. Among them, the fact that Gramsci was ostracized by most of his PCI comrades in the Turi jail is no longer disputed. Spriano, for example, minimizes its significance, but does not deny it.

39. This is a delicate point, since all sorts of political strands hostile and alien to Gramsci have gleefully raised it. Mussolini himself, on the occasion of Gramsci’s death, maliciously raised the question of the fate that would have met Gramsci “had he gone to Moscow.” Cited in Spriano, p. 119.

40. For an explanation of the logic and an account of the details of the Stalinist censorship of Lenin’s texts, see Leon Trotsky, The Stalin School of Falsification (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1937).


42. Togliatti’s pathetic response to the accusations voiced at that time by Dmitri Manuilsky is worth quoting: “Is posing these problems in the discussions with our comrades correct or not? If the Comintern says that it is not correct, we shall not pose them again . . . we will only say that the antifascist revolution will be a proletarian revolution.” Cited in Michele Pistillo “Gramsci, l’Internazionale comunista, lo stalinismo” in Gramsci nel mondo. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi gramsciani. Formia, 25–28 ottobre 1989. pp. 125–126.


44. Of course 1937 was a period of “moderation” strictly in terms of the kind of political line imposed by Moscow abroad. The climate remained extraordinarily charged in all other respects because of the anti-Trotskyist hysteria and massive persecution of the purges that were taking place in the Soviet Union at that time.
45. Cited in Spriano, p. 129.
46. Ibid., p. 129.
47. See Liguori, p. 11. See also Spriano, who provides the correct dates to measure the gap, but mistakenly calculates it as “almost a year and a half.” Spriano, p. 72.
49. See Liguori, p. 74; Spriano, p. 139.
50. See Salvatore Sechi, “Spunti critici sulle ‘Lettere dal carcere’ di Gramsci,” Quaderni Piacentini 29 (January 1967), p. 121. By comparison, Gramsci requested—and in the face of initial refusals, tenaciously insisted on requesting—the major works written by Trotsky after his expulsion from the Soviet Union. Gramsci was only successful in obtaining Trotsky’s autobiography, but took his case up the bureaucratic channels all the way to Mussolini.
51. For this single reference, see Antonio Gramsci, Quaderni del carcere (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), vol. IV, p. 2937.
52. Ezio Riboldi recalled Gramsci’s account of Stalin as dangerously infected by nationalist prejudices: “Lenin, having lived many years abroad, possessed an international perspective on political and social problems. The same cannot be said of Stalin, who has always lived in Russia and is captive of a nationalist mentality typically expressed in the cult of the ‘Great Russians’ . . . Even in the Comintern Stalin is Russian first and communist second: we must be careful.” Cited in Sechi, p. 119. Even more damning and significant is Ercole Piacentini’s testimony: “He spoke of Stalin as a despot and said he knew of Lenin’s testament and its judgment about Stalin as incompetent to assume the lead of the Bolshevik party . . . He [Gramsci] spoke to us about the French Revolution and how the revolutionaries began to cut their heads, decapitating the revolution. With reference to this, he hinted at the existence of a Soviet ‘Thermidor.’” Cited in Giancarlo Bergami, Il Gramsci di Togliatti e l’altro. L’autocritica del comunismo italiano (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1991), p. 16. In another account, Piacentini said, “Of Stalin he [Gramsci] spoke once or twice, and said that he knew of Lenin’s testament and agreed with it. He told us about the episode of a Russian friend of his who, in the middle of a discussion with Stalin, was physically thrown out of his office.” Cited in Bergami, p. 16.
53. The PCI only acknowledged the authenticity of this crucial document after two decades of embarrassed silence. See Sechi, p. 120.
54. Spriano, p. 131.
55. The citations in this paragraph are in Spriano, pp. 137–138. See also Liguori, Gramsci Conteso, p. 17.
56. Liguori, p. 49.
57. This is reluctantly admitted by Liguori (p. 49) as well as Spriano, in the article, Le Lettere dal carcere di Antonio Gramsci: un eccezionale monumento

58. Mirsky was a scholar of Russian literature and history whose work Gramsci admired. He became one of the communist victims of Stalinist persecution when he returned to the Soviet Union in 1932. Lucien Laurat was a Marxist economist who opposed Stalinism and joined the ranks of the Left Opposition. See Sechi, pp. 106–107.

59. Gramsci wrote two of the most significant texts that are not found in the first edition of the letters to Tatiana Schucht on July 13 and August 3, 1931. In them, Gramsci movingly describes his personal plight, but arguably also his political alienation from the PCI. Sechi discusses at length the significance of these letters by tying them to the increasing tensions, and finally to the ostracism, inflicted on Gramsci in prison by the Stalinists. See Sechi, pp. 107–114.

60. For example, Gramsci repeatedly begged his brother, Carlo, to move forward with the forms required for him to finally receive the works by Trotsky he wanted to read. All of these passages are expunged.

61. For example, Gramsci described prison life in a way that displayed familiarity, and even affection, for Amadeo Bordiga, whom the PCI instead denounced as a mortal enemy and fascist traitor: “I am usually the first to get up in the mornings; Bordiga, the engineer, says that in such moments my step has a special characteristic: it is the step of a man who has yet to get some coffee, and waits for it with a certain impatience. I am the one who prepares the coffee, that is, when I fail to convince Bordiga to do it, given his remarkable talents in the kitchen.” In the first edition we read simply: “I am usually the first to get up in the mornings. I am the one who prepares the coffee.” Cited in Sechi, pp. 104–105.

62. A historical precedent for this sort of operation can be found in the Second International’s falsified publication of the first edition of Marx and Engels’ correspondence. In that case, Eduard Bernstein and his colleagues in the German SPD also made numerous unacknowledged cuts and changes that were politically motivated. For a discussion of this episode, see Roger Morgan, The German Social Democrats and the First International 1867–1872 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), pp. 248–252.

63. Liguori usefully collects two pertinent testimonies of this discomfort. Alessandro Natta, who would later become the penultimate leader of the Italian Communist Party before its dissolution, testified to the profound disorientation provoked by the publication of Gramsci’s Notebooks in many of those party members who had been educated through the facile formulae of Stalinist orthodoxy: “In 1949 I was attending this school [the central PCI school located in Frattocchie] as a student, when the first volume of the notebooks appeared. I remember very well the powerful effect, which I
could describe as shocking, [ . . . ] that it had. This was true in particular of our teachers, who came from a different formation that made the comprehension of Gramsci’s marxism difficult and arduous.” Togliatti, writing to the head of the Comintern in 1941, long before the publication of the first edition of the *Notebooks*, registered the same point in terms of the potential danger it entailed: “Gramsci’s notebooks, most of which I have already studied, contain materials that can be utilized only after an accurate elaboration. Without this treatment, the material cannot be utilized. In fact, were certain parts of it to be utilized in their actual form, they could prove harmful to the party.” Both passages are cited in Liguori, p. 56.

64. I will discuss this period and Gramsci’s function in it more extensively in the next section of this chapter.

65. This is the conclusion reached by Valentino Gerratana, an eminent scholar associated with the PCI and editor of the later, complete edition of the *Notebooks*—thus not inclined to tip the scale of available evidence against Togliatti and the party. See Gerratana, “La prima edizione dei ‘Quaderni del carcere,’” in Maria Luisa Righi ed., *Gramsci nel mondo. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi gramsciani. Formia, 25–28 ottobre 1989*. p. 118.

66. See Francesco Benvenuti and Silvio Pons, “L’Unione Sovietica nei ‘Quaderni del carcere,’” in Giuseppe Vacca (ed.), *Gramsci e il Novecento* (Roma: Carocci, 1999), especially pp. 99 and 114. Gerratana, who as I observed writes from a perspective close to the PCI, called attention to a specific set of “autobiographical” notes written in 1933 that was conveniently left out of the first edition. These notes, and in particular one written as sort of parable about shipwrecked people turning into cannibals, is recognized by Gerratana as a “harsh criticism of Stalinist methods.” See Gerratana, p. 120. I will discuss this note in chapter three.

67. Gerratana acknowledges this, but does not discuss how this “reductive” presentation flowed from the PCI’s Stalinism in a specific political conjuncture. See Gerratana, p. 118.

68. Though Liguori is more interested in emphasizing the historical merits of the first edition, he does acknowledge this point. See Liguori, pp. 56–57.


70. See Caprioglio’s interpretation of the note. Ibid., pp. 66–71.

71. No less ironic is the fact that a great deal of the philological work required to rescue Gramsci’s legacy from this predicament was done by Alfonso Leonetti. Leonetti was one of the infamous “three” who were expelled from the PCI in 1929 as Trotskyists. He re-entered the party in 1962, writing a series of important works on Gramsci. See Giancarlo Bergami’s assessment of Leonetti’s work in G. Bergami, *Il Gramsci di Togliatti e l’altro. L’autocritica del comunismo italiano* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1991), p. 19. Another of the “three,” Pietro Tresso, on the occasion of Gramsci’s death published this stinging critique of the PCI’s
stewardship of Gramsci: “The philistines and bureaucrats, those who today try to drag Gramsci in their Stalinist betrayals and frauds already present us with a distorted Gramsci, unrecognizable to those who have known him personally, and to Gramsci himself, were he still alive . . . We do not know in what direction Gramsci evolved during his eleven years in prison, but we can say that his activity in its entirety, his idea of the development of the Party and of the working class movement is absolutely opposed to the shameful falsification and political swindles of Stalinism.” Pietro Tresso, “Un grande militante è morto . . . Gramsci,” cited in Arturo Peragalli (ed.), *Il Comunismo di sinistra e Gramsci* (Bari: Dedalo, 1978), pp. 95–96.


75. It is important to note that the passage in question merely registers Gramsci at his weakest, under the blows of the prison regime, and should not be taken as a definitive statement of his psychological condition. Gramsci continued to fight against this tendency with varying (albeit generally diminishing) success as time went on. The passage survived only as draft of a letter Gramsci would send to his wife on November 30, 1931. The actual letter uses only part of that note and does not include the passage in question.

76. Gramsci describes this process of decay, and his ability to still recognize it, in a letter to his wife dated March 6, 1933: “. . . one’s personality splits: one part merely observes the process, while the other part is subject to it; but the part which observes (the mere existence of this part means that there is still a measure of self-control and the capacity to recover) senses how precarious its position is, and that at some point it will disappear altogether . . .” Antonio Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere 1931–1937* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1996), p. 693. To take a fuller measure of Gramsci’s dread of the “pure domain of abstract intellect,” a comparison with his sketch of the new intellectual, which is also a self-portrait of his life outside of prison, is instructive: “The new intellectual’s mode of being can no longer consist of mere eloquence . . . but must instead actively engage practical life, as builder, organizer, ‘permanent persuader’ and not pure orator.” *Quaderni del Carcere*, vol. III, p. 1551. For a discussion of Gramsci’s distinction between “traditional” and “organic” intellectuals that also takes note of the historical and class specificity of such types, see Giuseppe Vacca, “Intellectuals and the Marxist Theory of the State,” in Anne Showstack Sassoon (ed.), *Approaches to Gramsci* (London: Writers and Readers, 1982), pp. 59–67.

77. See Gramsci’s March 28, 1932 letter to his wife for a discussion, inspired by Marx’s first thesis on Ludwig Feuerbach, of “interest” as associated with praxis, concrete activity.

78. This approach is characteristic of Anglo-American academia, as documented by Brennan’s critique. But it also appears here and there in Italian scholarship,
where blindness to the political history of Gramsci as a thinker is less common and excusable. In a recent collection of mostly Italian work on Gramsci, one finds two examples of this kind of scholarship: Giulio Ferroni, “Il pensiero di Gramsci e le modificazioni dei modelli intellettuali nel Novecento” and Mario Telò, “Note sul futuro dell’Occidente e la teoria delle relazioni internazionali,” both in Giuseppe Vacca (ed.), Gramsci e il Novecento (Roma: Carocci, 1999), pp. 39–50, 51–74. Ferroni presents a depoliticized postmodern notion of Gramsci as “cultural critic” who can maintain ironic distance from the unsophisticated nonsense spewed by left and right alike. Ferroni, p. 47. Mario Telò moves away from the communist Gramsci in the name of a politically “disinterested” approach to the great thinker, and the “advancement of . . . social sciences.” Telò, p. 52. These works may well be the expression of an ongoing process by which Anglo-American Gramsciology, through the powerful twin-engine of postmodernism and social science, will succeed in impressing its own inclinations and protocols over the new Italian scholarship on Gramsci. Earlier examples of this sort of scholarship can be found in Gianni Vattimo’s timely attempt in 1991 to cut all the dead Marxist branches in Gramsci’s thought (hegemony, historic bloc, theory of the party, class standpoint, and so on) in order to discover and preserve his “postmodern sensibility.” See Gianni Vattimo, “Gramsci come noi” L’Espresso, January 13, 1991. Finally, Gennaro Sasso provided again in 1991 an amusing variation on this theme from the standpoint of professional philosophy. Sasso argued that Gramsci, though a passably cultured individual, cannot be admitted into the caste of serious scholars, as this requires, after all, “repetitive study of great classics that need to be examined for years and years.” Cited in Liguori, p. 239.

79. Gramsci himself, in considering the prospects for a new kind of organic intellectual developed for and by the working class, argued for the overcoming of such a dichotomy: “The intellectual’s error consists in believing that one can . . . be an intellectual (and not a pure pedant) if distinct and separate from the people-nation, that is, without feeling the elementary passions of the people, understanding them . . . and connecting them dialectically to the laws of history and to a superior conception of the world, scientifically and coherently elaborated—i.e. knowledge.” See Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds.), Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 418.

80. “Gramsci . . . could not create a new philosophy and accomplish the portentous intellectual revolution that is attributed to him because his intent was to create in Italy a political party—a task that has nothing to do with the disinterested pursuit of truth.” Cited in Buttigieg, p. 140.

81. Ibid., p. 140. Buttigieg then proceeds to effectively dissect Paul Piccone’s Italian Marxism as an example of this tendency.

82. Ibid., p. 142.

85. Ibid., pp. 100–101.
86. The Bolshevik principle of “democratic centralism” expressed for a while a spirited and genuinely democratic intraparty life. In large part as a result of the defeats of the Left Opposition beginning in 1923, and of the Joint Opposition between 1926 and 1927, “democratic centralism” was transformed into a system of complete obedience, unanimous votes, and administrative measures against intraparty dissent. Through the Comintern, this process also transformed the non-Russian Communist parties into lifeless bureaucratic apparatuses that could be easily steered from Moscow in any direction. I will discuss this degeneration in chapter five.
87. Potenza himself, after a long month of reprimands and “self-criticism,” wrote an article in the same publication acknowledging his mistakes. See Spriano, p. 101.
90. Though now still surrounded by a lingering mythical aura, the turn to the popular front was in fact a disastrous and cynical Stalinist maneuver. As a matter of theory, it resurrected the Menshevik positions about the two distinct and separate revolutions (bourgeois and socialist), insisted on the progressive role of the bourgeoisie, and on the collaboration with bourgeois parties. As a matter of political practice, its gestures toward democracy covered savage repressions in the Soviet Union and a series of betrayals elsewhere—most notably, the accommodation of the fascist invasion of Ethiopia (1935–36), and the reactionary role played by Stalinism during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). In the first case, the Stalinist regime, in the process of courting Mussolini’s neutrality, not only failed to take an unambiguous and active anticolonial position, but even sold to fascist Italy the oil and coal that was necessary for the invasion. The repercussions of this betrayal were far-reaching. For example, African-American sympathy and support for the Communist Party in the United States, which had hitherto been far from insignificant, collapsed. See J. Calvitt Clarke III, “Soviet Appeasement, Collective Security, and the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935 and 1936,” Selected Annual Proceedings of the Florida Conference of Historians 4 (December 1996), pp. 115–132. In the better-known and documented case of the Spanish Civil War, the Stalinist regime ruthlessly suppressed the POUM and actively opposed the mounting social revolution that was taking place with the occupation of the factories and redistribution and collectivization of land. See George Orwell, Homage to Catalonia (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952); Leon Trotsky, The Spanish Revolution (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973); Felix Morrow, Revolution and Counterrevolution in Spain (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1974).
91. Liguori, pp. 14–15. This episode was doubly ironic. First, it is likely that Grieco was the one who had penned the harsh editorial rebuke of Potenza.
that had been published only a year earlier. Second, Grieco’s article was published in *Lo Stato Operaio*, the same PCI publication that had completely avoided any and all references to Gramsci for over two years.

92. Spriano, p. 105.
93. Ibid., p. 105.
94. By 1944, the PCI had developed into a mass party, counting on over half a million members. See Agosti, p. 51. The PCI also had at its disposal a strong military organization that it had built and employed against fascism and Nazi occupation during the period of the “Resistenza.”

95. Liguori, p. 100.
97. Though Gramsci insisted on the necessity for the PCI to express the concepts and goals of the communist movement in harmony with the peculiar history and culture of Italy, his attitude toward it remained critical. For example, while discussing the popularity of the poet Gabriele D’Annunzio as a political figure, Gramsci remarked on “... a permanent trait of the Italian people: the fanatical and naïve admiration for intelligence as such, for the intelligent person as such, which corresponds to the Italians’ cultural nationalism, perhaps the only form of popular chauvinism that can be found in Italy.” Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, vol. II, pp. 1201–1202.

98. Palmiro Togliatti “Gramsci, la Sardegna, l’Italia” in Liguori (ed.), *Scritti su Gramsci*, pp. 118–128. Togliatti’s assertion found a bitter confirmation in 1994, when the fascist party Movimento Sociale Italiano, seeking post-fascist respectability, claimed Gramsci as part of its heritage.

99. This was the intended effect of a conscious effort. The PCI’s national newspaper published an article arguing that the *Letters* revealed a Gramsci who “renewed the classical ideal of man for our times.” Cited in Sechi, p. 122. Sechi’s article offers a useful overview of the reactions to the publication of the letters. Gramsci’s own opinions on the “classical” orientation of the traditional Italian intellectual is expressed in his criticism of Giustino Fortunato and Benedetto Croce, who, lamentably, were able to orient the “cultured youth in the South” away from a revolutionary perspective and toward “a middle way of classical serenity in thought and action.” See Quintin Hoare, (ed.), *Antonio Gramsci Selections from Political Writings 1921–1926* (New York: International Publishers, 1978), p. 460.

100. The three quotations above are cited in Sechi, p. 122. As in the case of the question of national culture, while Gramsci emphasized the problem of national intellectuals and their development, his attitude toward Italian intellectuals remained critical and had little in common with the supraclass nationalism of the PCI. For example, in considering the fact that Italians preferred to read foreign authors, Gramsci explained that, “the country lacks an intellectual and moral national bloc ... [Italian] intellectuals do not rise
from the people, even though some of them are, by accident, of popular origin; they do not feel connected to the people, except in the rhetorical sense; they do not feel the needs, the aspirations, the diffused sentiments of the people. They are something detached, floating above the Italian people—that is to say a separate caste, not an articulation of the people themselves and organically functional to them... the 'cultured class,' with its intellectual activity, is detached from the people-nation, not because the latter did or does not demonstrate its interest in this activity... but because the native intellectual element is more foreign to them than the actual foreigners.” Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, vol. III, p. 2117.

105. Ibid., p. 228. The foundation was the second incarnation of the institution created by the PCI in 1950 to do the work of scholarly stewardship of Gramsci’s textual legacy. As detailed by Liguori, Schiavone set the tone for the 1987 international conference of Gramscian study organized by the foundation. The “classical” quality of Gramsci’s political thought was interpreted in different ways, but largely for the same effect. With a postmodern twist, for example, Giacomo Marramao described Gramsci as a “classic in the strict 19th century sense of the term: as a consequence of the impossibility of his system.” Cited in Liguori, p. 229.
106. For an interesting analysis of the last stage of this process and Gramsci’s role in it, see Arcangelo Leone de Castris, *Gramsci Rimosso* (Roma: Datanews, 1997).

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

4. The circumstances of Gramsci’s takeover of the PCI leadership from Bordiga in the 1923–1924 period is especially important in this regard, particularly because it coincides with the earliest Stalinist manipulations in the Russian party and the Comintern.


6. Ibid., p. 17.

7. This point would require a fuller elaboration. I will simply note here that Stalinism was no mere matter of the consciousness—be it “reformed” or unrepentant—of the Soviet political leadership, for at least two reasons. First, because it was rooted in a series of objective conditions that characterized the Soviet Union—its relative economic and cultural backwardness, its subordinate position in the world economy, its isolation, and so on. Second, because Stalinism was an extended, profound process of political, theoretical, and moral decay that cannot be easily wiped out by alligator tears and post festum denunciations on the part of people and parties, like Khrushchev and the PCUS, or Togliatti and the PCI, who were so deeply implicated with its victory and consolidation.

8. A partial list of Stalinist parties today would include the Communist Party USA, the Party of Italian Communists (PdCI) and Communist Refoundation (Prc) in Italy, the French Communist Party (PCF), the Iraqi Communist Party, the Tudeh Party of Iran (TP), the CPI and CPI(M) in India, and the South African Communist Party. There are also, of course, parties that abandoned Stalinism by altogether severing their formal connections with their Marxist past. This list would include the Left Party of Sweden and Die Linke in Germany.

9. August Nimtz, “Marxism,” in Joel Krieger, ed. The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 574. The Marxist biologist Richard Levins colorfully expressed this same point when he wrote the following: “There is, of course, truth in the claim that these horrendous episodes are not communism but distortions of communism just as we might say that corn smut is not corn but a disease of corn. But there is also the other side of it: corn smut is a disease of corn, not of tomatoes or orange trees.” Richard Levins, “A View from the Trough” Monthly Review 48, no. 4 (September 1996), p. 19.

10. Perhaps the most powerful example of an ex-Menshevik performing important and murderous functions for Stalinism is Andrei Vishinsky, chief prosecutor at the infamous Moscow trials in the 1930s. There are other examples as well, such as the diplomat Ivan Maisky and the Supreme Court judge Dmitri Sverchkov.

aspect of “democratic centralism” as the regime regulating the internal relations of early Bolshevism was real and should be taken seriously, see Cohen, “Bolshevism and Stalinism,” pp. 13–19. This general point will probably grate against a deeply entrenched common sense. It should be remembered that while the Bolsheviks are usually and flippantly portrayed as the living antithesis of democracy, the embarrassing, virulently anti-democratic record of the “moderate” socialists and liberals in 1917 Russia (to say nothing of their colleagues elsewhere) is hardly ever subject to the same scrutiny. To go back to Levins’ analogy, tomatoes and orange trees have their own diseases as well, though they generally do not attract as much scientific interest.


13. Urban’s assessment of Togliatti is particularly difficult to digest once seen in the light of the history of the “intellectual” and “communist” Gramsci described in the previous chapter. According to Urban, what distinguished Togliatti and most of the “innovators” in the PCI was their superior university education: “[Their] educational background . . . surely contributed to their partiality for reasoned discussion of differing viewpoints. Many had received a high level of university training in the humanities or law. Gramsci had excelled in the former and Togliatti in the latter at the widely respected University of Turin before 1917.” Moreover, “the readiness of the men around Togliatti to assess realistically the possibilities for action in the Italian context marked them as moderates compared to the radical sectarians in the PCI and the Comintern at large . . . unlike individuals from proletarian backgrounds . . . they knew from their own life experience that it was indeed possible to persuade middle-class people of the virtues of communism.” Joan Barth Urban, Moscow and the Italian Communist Party (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 24, 51. Evidently, Togliatti’s outlook and disposition was so broad and elevated as to accommodate, and indeed direct, both the production of the Olympian academic Gramsci, as well as its opposite, the intransigent, “know-nothing” communist. For a scathing, and entirely appropriate critique of Togliatti’s vainglorious posturing as a cultured humanist, see Perlini, pp. 113, 127.


15. Dmitri Manuilsky was an exception among Stalin’s allies. Unlike many others who were killed during the purges, Manuilsky fell out of favor relatively late, in 1950, and was merely forced to retire. Ernst Thälmann was arrested by the Gestapo in 1933, long before the purges, and died in a Nazi concentration camp.

16. Concerning the origins of socialism in one country, Isaac Deutscher writes, “Bukharin may justly be regarded as the co-author of the doctrine. He supplied
the theoretical arguments for it and gave it that scholarly polish which it lacked in Stalin’s more or less crude version.” Isaac Deutscher, Stalin (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), p. 299.

17. From this perspective, the fact that in 1988 the Gorbachev-led Communist Party posthumously rehabilitated Bukharin but not Trotsky is a fitting and revealing bookend to the history of Stalinism as a ruling force in the Soviet Union. In this assessment I differ not just from Urban, but also from Cohen, who is a proponent of the idea that Bukharin represented a political alternative to Stalinism, rather than one of its less fortunate co-founders. For a fuller articulation of Cohen’s position, see Stephen F. Cohen, Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

18. Stalin’s policy of forced collectivization departed wildly, and with terrible consequences from the New Economic Policy. See, for example, Lenin’s “Preliminary Draft Theses on the Agrarian Question,” written for the Comintern’s Second Congress. Published in Alan Adler (ed.) Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International (London: Ink Links, 1980), pp. 113–123. Moreover, it is not the case, as is typically argued, that with the third period turn Stalin simply adopted the program of the Left Opposition on this matter. As an example of this mistaken idea, see Martin Jay, Marxism and Totality (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p.164, fn. 54. Even the wing of the Left Opposition that was most intransigent on matters of economic policy, a group represented by Evgeni Preobrazhensky, remained within the parameters of the NEP. It argued not for forced and wholesale collectivization of farms, but for a shift in the economic balance between town and country in favor of the former by altering the price structure of agricultural and industrial goods. See Cohen, “Bolshevism and Stalinism,” pp. 21–23; Isaac Deutscher, Stalin, pp. 318–319; Ernest Mandel, Trotsky as Alternative (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 59–69.

19. Gramsci’s positions in the early 1920s have also been a source of scholarly and political controversy. Typically, they have to do with the relation between Bolshevism and the factory council movement in Turin, of which Gramsci was part. They also concern the degree of commitment to the leadership of Amadeo Bordiga manifested by Gramsci at the beginning of his political career in the PCI. I will not discuss these questions here.

20. This is essentially Vacca’s position, though for the most part he avoids addressing the question directly. For the clearest expression of his position, see Vacca, “Gramsci a Roma Togliatti a Mosca,” pp. 102–103, 105.

21. This is the position articulated in Perlini’s important book. See Perlini, pp. 30, 114, 126, 139.

22. I have already discussed two possible and one definite exception to this—cases in which Stalinism affected Gramsci directly while in prison. The two questionable episodes are described in chapter two, footnote 38. The definite
one has to do with the discord Gramsci experienced with his comrades in prison when he refused to accept the positions of the third period. This led to a breaking off of political discussions and a painful ostracism.

23. Gramsci died in 1937, but his health had already dramatically deteriorated since the early part of 1935, when he ceased to write in his notebooks.

24. Concerning writing, Gramsci was initially prohibited from doing so in his cell. Later, having gained this privilege, he had access only to two of his notebooks at the time, something that accounts in part for the fragmented character and disorder of the texts. In terms of reading, as already explained, Gramsci had to request books and publications through a strict bureaucratic procedure, and was sometimes refused when the material was deemed politically sensitive. After all, as the prosecutor infamously put it during Gramsci’s trial, the fascist regime intended to “prevent this brain from functioning for twenty years.”

25. I have already remarked about Mussolini’s personal interest in the potential utility of Gramsci for purposes of propaganda. See chapter two, footnote 39.

26. Though Benvenuti and Pons do not fully justify this claim, they also propose that Gramsci exercised self-censorship in the notebooks. In this spirit, they suggest that Trotsky plays crucial role in the notebooks, functioning as a convenient “lightning rod” for Gramsci’s attacks against Stalinism. See Benvenuti and Pons, p. 94. Perry Anderson had already proposed this conjecture without developing it. See Perry Anderson, “The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci,” *New Left Review* 100 (November 1976-January 1977), pp. 10–11.

27. Sergio Caprioglio suggests the possibility that Gramsci consciously resorted to the “aesopic language” pioneered by Russian radicals to elude tsarist censorship. See Sergio Caprioglio, “Gramsci e l’URSS: tre note nei quaderni del carcere,” *Belfagor* 46, no. 31 (January 1991), p. 75. The idea of an aesopic dimension of Gramsci’s prison writings (*Notebooks* and *Letters* alike) has been recently developed in an intriguing way by Angelo Rossi and Giuseppe Vacca. On the basis of recent evidence, this argument suggests that at least some of Gramsci’s literary and philosophical reflections (his interpretation of a specific canto in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and his discussion of Benedetto Croce) were in fact an aesopic device to convey certain political judgments on the conduct of the PCI and the International. See Angelo Rossi and Giuseppe Vacca, *Gramsci tra Mussolini e Stalin* (Roma: Fazi, 2007), pp. 38–55.


29. For the relationship between Trotsky and Bordiga, see Documenti sul comunismo rivoluzionario in Italia. vol. 4: La Liquidazione della sinistra del P.C.d’IT. (1925) (Milano: Edizioni L’Internazionale, 1991); Silverio Corvisieri, *Trotsky e il Comunismo Italiano* (Roma: Samonà e Savelli, 1969); Vacca,

30. This had to do in part with the relatively stronger indigenous roots and the relatively more independent character of the PCI compared to other parties in the Comintern. It also had to do with a series of factional displacements that were taking place in the Russian party in the early to mid-1920s. The Stalinist majority, which at that time also included Zinoviev and Kamenev against Trotsky, initially took rightist positions on the revolutionary situation in Germany. After the 1923 defeat in Germany, the majority leapfrogged to leftist positions for two years, accusing Trotsky and his allies of constituting a “socialdemocratic” right wing deviation. It was during this period that Gramsci and Togliatti came into power with Zinoviev’s blessings as a sort of compromise (at least on paper) “center” in a rather fluid situation. See Vacca, “Gramsci a Roma Togliatti a Mosca,” p. 104. Bergami, *Il Gramsci di Togliatti e l’altro: L’autocritica del comunismo italiano* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1991), p. 36. By 1926, the Russian majority, having lost Zinoviev and Kamenev to Trotsky’s side, stood to the right of the opposition and looked with apprehension and mistrust toward the majority in the PCI’s Central Committee.

31. A vivid account of this increasing pressure is found in the letter from the Italian leadership to Togliatti dated October 6, 1926, published in Daniele (ed.), *Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca. Il carteggio del 1926* (Torino: Einaudi, 1999), pp. 396–399.

32. Vacca, “Gramsci a Roma Togliatti a Mosca,” p. 70.

33. Tactically, this made sense because the Russian majority had yet to solidify its position within the Comintern, which had been Zinoviev’s main power base.

34. Togliatti’s letters from Moscow to the Italian leadership between June and September 1926 insist, with an increasingly alarmed and peremptory tone, on the need for the PCI to take a political position. See Togliatti’s letters dated June 28, July 12 and 29, August 11 and 23, and September 6 1926, which are published in Daniele (ed.), *Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca. Il carteggio del 1926*.


36. Most of the older work done on the 1926 episode by PCI scholars such as Giuseppe Berti and Paolo Spriano tended to minimize it and explain it by reducing it to the question of “method.” See Vacca’s useful review of this literature in, “Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca,” pp. 14–21. For a more recent attempt to minimize the 1926 episode in order to present an unbroken continuity between Gramsci and Togliatti, see Michele Pistillo, “Gramsci, l’Internazionale comunista, lo stalinismo,” in Maria Luisa Righi (ed.), *Gramsci nel Mondo* (Roma: Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, 1995), pp. 121–131. See also Perlini’s scathing critique of such efforts, old and new, on the part of the PCI and its intellectuals in *Gramsci e il Gramscismo*, pp. 8–12.
37. See Togliatti’s June 1926 letter published in Daniele (ed.), Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca. Il carteggio del 1926, pp. 322–329. Togliatti and the Russian Stalinists had reason to fear Bordiga, in spite of his significant differences with Trotsky and the Russian minority. During the Comintern’s Fifth Congress of June-July 1924, Trotsky had to persuade Bordiga not to intervene openly in his defense against the attacks of majority. Later, in February 1926, after long discussions with Trotsky, Bordiga attacked Stalin in dramatic fashion when the latter met for clarifications with the Italian delegation to the Comintern’s enlarged executive.

38. Bordiga opposed the turn to the united front strategy in the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1921, and opposed the effort to fuse with a faction of the reformist Italian Socialist Party discussed at the Fourth Comintern Congress of 1922, which he refused to attend. He had resigned from the PCI Central Committee in August 1923, and by 1924 led a left-wing minority faction against the majority leadership led by Gramsci and Togliatti. The question of the means by which the new PCI majority was installed and consolidated its control was and remain subject of controversy. At the clandestine convention of the PCI held in May 1924 in Como, for example, Bordiga received the support of the attending delegates by a ratio of 10 to 1, and yet the Gramsci-Togliatti group firmly controlled the Central Committee of the party. Later, in 1925, leading members of Bordiga’s left faction were suspended from all the ruling organs of the party, including several important urban centers where the left had a majority. These kinds of manipulations and administrative measures, which were mild in comparison to what would follow, were simultaneously being employed in the Russian party against Trotsky, as occurred, for example, in the preparation to the Thirteenth Party Congress held in May 1924. See Robert Daniels, The Conscience of the Revolution: Communist Opposition in Soviet Russia (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 238–239. While I will not address it here in a sustained manner, this earlier period is far from irrelevant in arriving at a political assessment of Gramsci’s relation to Stalinism. For a harsh critique of Gramsci’s role in this period, which however fails to address the question of the historical and political specificity of Stalinism, see Thomas R. Bates, “Antonio Gramsci and the Bolshevization of the PCI,” Journal of Contemporary History 11 (1976), pp. 115–131. For some of the historical details concerning this period see Galli, pp. 64–66.


40. In May 1924, in the thick of furious attacks against “Trotskyism,” Gramsci had introduced the political equation between Bordiga and Trotsky. This equation, which as I have noted was far from accurate, had a convenient instrumental use: it allowed the PCI to present its ongoing struggle against Bordiga as a sufficient contribution to the struggle against Trotskyism demanded by the Stalinist majority in the Soviet Union. Later, in February 1925 Gramsci
intervened at a meeting of the PCI Central Committee with an open attack against Trotsky that ascribed to him the positions that were actually held by Stalin. See Perlini, pp. 133–134 and Corvisieri, pp. 31–32 for two very different assessments of this episode. Whatever Gramsci’s actual intentions might have been in these instances, at the fifth meeting of the Comintern’s enlarged executive in March-April 1925 the Stalinists interpreted his behavior as an unacceptable concession to Trotskyism and attacked the PCI accordingly. See Vacca, “Gramsci a Roma Togliatti a Mosca,” p. 89. All of these episodes illustrate the intermediate and complex character of Gramsci’s position even before 1926—the formal adherence to the Stalinist majority paired to enough ambiguities and hesitations to elicit its suspicions and dissatisfaction. They also provide a sense of the difficulty in tracing the line that separates the more or less convenient equivocations characteristic of opportunism and an extremely guarded and covert form of political opposition.

41. Togliatti was left without a response for a while. He then decided to write again, reminding Gramsci and the others with a remarkably stern tone that his communication about not sending Bordiga to Moscow had not been a suggestion, but had the force of an official decision. See Vacca, “Gramsci a Roma Togliatti a Mosca,” pp. 54–55.

42. Ibid., pp. 56–57. Emphasis in the original.

43. The centerpiece of this exchange is the important letter discussed in chapter two in terms of the vicissitudes of its denial, its proposed public denunciation, its publication against the PCI’s best efforts, and its belated acknowledgment. The exchange consists of the following documents: the letter written by Gramsci on behalf of the PCI Politburo to the Central Committee of the Russian communist party on October 14, 1926; a personal note by Gramsci to Togliatti with the same date; Togliatti’s reply to the Politburo of the PCI, dated October 18, 1926; Togliatti’s personal reply to Gramsci with the same date; the PCI Politburo’s response to Togliatti dated October 26, 1926; and Gramsci’s personal response to Togliatti with the same date. Most, though not all of this material is available in Quintin Hoare, (ed.), Antonio Gramsci Selection from Political Writings 1921–1926 (New York: International Publishers, 1978), pp. 426–440. Daniele's volume includes all of these documents in the original language. See Daniele (ed.), Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca: Il carteggio del 1926, pp. 402–403, 404–412, 414–419, 420–425, 435, 436–439.


45. Ibid., p. 411.

46. Ibid., p. 406.

47. Ibid., p. 408.

48. Ibid., pp. 410–411. By “corporatist,” following in the tradition of the Third International, Gramsci meant an outlook focused on the interests of the
working class understood in the narrowest sense. The concept and principle of hegemony, in contrast, demanded that the working class and its party actively engage the broadest range of struggles and, when necessary, sacrifice its immediate interests in order to prove by words as well as deeds that it could serve as the leading force in a broad revolutionary alliance. The need for and concrete policies facilitating the smychka, the alliance between the working class and the peasantry, before, during, and after the revolution, constitute the clearest example of these hegemonic sacrifices, which also apply to the question of the petty-bourgeoisie, oppressed nationalities, and women. Gramsci’s famous, unfinished essay on the southern question is a brilliant critique of corporatism and an exposition of the concrete hegemonic struggle waged by the communists in Italy.

49. Ibid., pp. 416–417.
50. Ibid., p. 416.
51. Ibid., p. 411.
52. Gramsci had resisted this vulgar revisionism also in its earlier stages. In a letter to Togliatti dated February 9, 1924, he accurately and very favorably described the political position of Trotsky’s Left Opposition against the first wave of slander and manipulations. In this letter, moreover, Gramsci endorsed Trotsky’s assessment of the relative merits of the various Bolshevik leaders during the revolution. The letter is available in English in Hoare (ed.), pp.191–203.
54. Ibid., pp. 421, 423.
55. Ibid., p. 408.
56. Gramsci expressed here a tendency that in the international communist movement was often labeled “centrism”—a vacillating, temporizing indecision in the face of an undeferrable struggle of monumental consequences. In this sense, a useful analogy may be found in the organization the Bolsheviks derisively called the “two-and-a-half International.” This international tendency, present mainly in Germany, Austria, and England, wanted to straddle the fence between the reformist and the revolutionary parties after the dramatic unfolding of events (the explosion of the imperialist war and the Russian Revolution, both of which confronted the working class movement with stark questions of political allegiance that did not admit equivocation) so forcefully undercut the basis for conciliation. For the Comintern’s critique of the two-and-a-half International, see Adler (ed.), pp. 209, 297–299.
58. Ibid., pp. 437–438.
59. This expression is repeated twice: Daniele (ed.), Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca. Il carteggio del 1926, pp. 436, 437.
61. See the October 26 letter from the PCI’s Politburo to Togliatti. Daniele (ed.), Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca. Il carteggio del 1926, p. 434.
63. Ibid., pp. 9–10, 12.
64. Ibid., p. 12.
65. Cited in Vacca, “Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca,” p. 12. Grieco’s statement had the formal support of all the members of the Central Committee, except for Carlo Venegoni, who was a member of Bordiga’s left wing. But even behind this near-consensus, it is possible that certain differences among the various members of the Italian leadership still lurked. Vacca deduces from the available material that certain members of the Italian leadership, particularly Mauro Scocciarmaro, may still have defended Gramsci’s positions, though in an extremely cryptic fashion. See Ibid., pp. 144–146. Nonetheless, Scocciarmaro was arrested a few days after the meeting, while many of the remaining leaders, like Camilla Ravera, quickly adapted to Stalinism, particularly as Togliatti made his return from Moscow to assume the leadership of the party.
66. For the Comintern’s official recognition that the upswing of the “first period” of the revolutionary movement had drawn to a close, see Adler (ed.), pp. 184–185.
67. This is not to say that the united front tactic excluded a priori or discouraged actual joint action with the reformist organization if and when they did in fact agree upon such a course. For the Comintern’s explanation of the united front tactic, see Adler (ed.), pp. 302, 396–397.
69. Ibid., pp. 23–24.
70. See the letter to Togliatti dated April 13, 1926, published in Daniele (ed.), Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca. Il carteggio del 1926, pp. 248–252.
71. See Togliatti’s intervention at the Presidium in Daniele (ed.), Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca. Il carteggio del 1926, pp. 254–267. See also Togliatti’s personal note to the Italian leadership, which justifies his endorsement of the Comintern’s critique of the PCI. Ibid., p. 270.
72. See Vacca, “Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca,” p. 32.
73. Ibid., p. 33.
74. This is part of a complex chain of events and shifts in the position of the Stalinist faction. Initially, the Comintern majority had not taken seriously enough the possibility of a revolutionary breakthrough in Germany in the second half of 1923. When the uprising failed, in large part as a result of this uncertainty and vacillation, the majority reacted by embracing what was by then a mistaken and counter-productive left wing position about the impending westward extension of the revolution, encouraging, for instance, failed putschist adventures in Estonia and Bulgaria. This set the standard for...
later, even more disastrous and ill-timed swings. For example, in 1926 the Stalinist majority imposed a right wing and this time clearly neo-Menshevik line on the Chinese Communist party, disarming it and subordinating it to the Kuomintang. The bitter fruit of this policy was the slaughter of the communist workers of Shanghai in April 1926. After they had risen and captured power in the city in March, they were instructed by the Comintern to welcome Chiang Kai-shek in the city as a revolutionary leader and to disarm. Once they reluctantly did so, Chiang Kai-shek’s troops promptly massacred them. The Stalinist majority reacted to this disaster by leaping to an ultra-left adventurist line that resulted in another disaster with the Canton armed uprising in December of 1927. Such episodes illustrate the process by which Stalinism, first through a series of policy blunders, then through a far more consciously counterrevolutionary and criminal behavior contributed mightily to the failure of the Russian revolution to act as the spark envisioned by Lenin. Put differently, though Stalinism was initially merely the symptom of the crisis of the international communist movement, it soon began to function as an active force, as the conscious organizer of its defeats.

75. The fifth meeting of the Comintern’s enlarged executive was also the occasion for the definitive condemnation of “Trotskyism” as a deviation. On this, far from unrelated matter, the PCI and Gramsci were also the subject of suspicion and attack. As I have noted above, Gramsci had insisted on the false equation between Bordiga and Trotsky as a way to avoid taking a real stand and participating in the struggle against the latter. At this meeting, however, Stalin demanded from the PCI an explicit pronouncement on Trotsky. Forced to do so, the PCI, through Scoccimarro, chose to join in the ritual denunciation of Trotskyism. See Bergami, p. 60. But the lack of enthusiasm displayed by the PCI for such activities was duly noted by the Stalinist majority. The PCI was criticized again by Dmitri Manuilsky and Jules Humbert-Droz at the end of the meeting. This earlier episode no doubt contributed to the Stalinist fear and suspicions of the PCI in the events of 1926. See Vacca, “Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca,” p. 89.


77. Ibid., p. 297.

78. Ibid., p. 294.


80. For example, Gramsci wrote that, “Right from today, we must reduce to a minimum the influence and organization of the parties that may make up the left coalition, in order to increase the probability of a revolutionary collapse of Fascism.” Gramsci, “A Study of the Italian Situation,” in Bellamy (ed.), p. 296
To be clear, the recognition of the probability of a democratic interlude was also not the prescient expression of the later Stalinist strategy of popular front and its neo-Menshevik “two-stage” theory of revolution, as the PCI would later propose. Spriano, to his credit, recognizes this. Paolo Spriano, *Antonio Gramsci and the Party: The Prison Years* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), p. 69. Gramsci’s perspective here simply rearticulated the Bolshevik approach to the transitional, “democratic” phase between February and October 1917, at a time when Stalinism was engaged in a sharp right wing deviation from it.

Gramsci must have been aware of this divergence and conscious of its potential danger. For instance, he prefaced his insistence on the prospects for factory councils with this revealing qualification: “If I were not afraid of being accused of *Ordine Nuovism*, I would say that one of the most important problems today . . . is . . .” Gramsci, “A Study of the Italian Situation,” in Bellamy (ed.), p. 299. This is rather characteristic of Gramsci’s conduct, articulating potentially dangerous positions with enough rhetorical contortions to retain plausible deniability in the face of Stalinist pressure. Another example of this conduct is found in the crucial October 14, 1926 letter to the Soviet leadership discussed above. Gramsci concluded this letter by directing his appeal for party unity especially to the opposition, since, “We like to be feel certain that the majority . . . does not intend to exact a crushing victory in the struggle and is disposed to avoid excessive measures.” Daniele (ed.), *Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca. Il carteggio del 1926*, p. 411. Togliatti rightly reminded Gramsci that “the expression ‘we like to feel certain’ . . . can only actually mean that we ARE NOT certain,” Ibid., p. 422.


The factional alignment in the Russian party over the situation in England, the role of the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Anglo-Soviet Committee is quite complex. In general, it can be said that, at least after the failure of the general strike, the Stalinist continuing support for the Anglo-Soviet Committee expressed an inclination to subsume, and indeed to increasingly undermine, revolutionary progress abroad to the defensive foreign policy interests of the Soviet Union, understood in the narrow, and ultimately self-defeating sense of preserving territorial integrity. This was the case in the same period with the disastrous endorsement of the Kuomintang, or, later, with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. On the specific programmatic
point of continuing the communist support of the Anglo-Soviet Commit-
tee, it is quite likely that Gramsci and the PCI’s leadership’s agreement with 
the Stalinist line, though clouded by a general lack of political information 
and complicated by their broader strategic divergence, was substantive, and 
not merely formal. This seems clear from the letter written by Scoccimarro 
to Togliatti on June 28, 1926. Daniele (ed.), Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a 

91. “In reality, we are entering a new phase in the progression of the capitalist 
crisis. This phase is taking a different form in the countries of the capitalist 
periphery and in the advanced capitalist countries . . . In the peripheral 
countries, there is the problem of the phase I have referred to as intermedi-
ate, lying between the phases of political and technical preparation for the 
revolution. In other countries . . . it seems to me that the problem is still 
one of political preparation.” Gramsci, “A Study of the Italian Situation,” in 
Bellamy (ed.), p. 299.

92. Gramsci supplemented this emphasis on regional differences in determining 
revolutionary strategy with a call to apply this strategy in a way consistent with 
“the concrete problems” and the “popular forces as they are historically deter-

93. Ibid., p. 297.

94. Vacca, “Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca,” p. 96. This is not to say, of 
course, that Gramsci here expounded the kind of theory of “frontal assault” 
he would later criticize in the Notebooks. Though according to the August 
report the conquest of power in the West could never be dismissed on the 
basis of an unfavorable reading of the capitalist “phase,” Gramsci undoubt-
edly did not intend to suggest a vulgar, optimistic simplification of all the 
complexities and difficulties that a successful revolutionary struggle would 
entail. On the contrary, in the August 1926 report as well as in the Note-
books, it is clear that the lack of an immediate correspondence between eco-
nomic and political prospects complicated rather than simplified the tasks 
of analysis and action in the West.

95. Ibid., p. 126.

96. On this last characteristic of socialism in one country, Trotsky wrote with 
great foresight that, “The new theory has made a point of honor of the 
freakish idea that the USSR can perish from military intervention but never 
from its own economic backwardness . . . [but] a Ford tractor is just as dan-
gerous as a Creusot gun, with the sole difference that while the gun can 
function only from time to time, the tractor brings its pressure to bear upon 
us constantly. Besides, the tractor knows that a gun stands behind it, as a 
last resort.” Leon Trotsky, The Third International after Lenin (New York: 

97. This aspect of the August 1926 report is rather typical of Gramsci and is 
echoed elsewhere. It appears in the 1924 program of the resurrected Ordine
Nuovo journal in the context of a reflection on the earliest (1919–1920) communist experience of Gramsci and the PCI. There, Gramsci recognizes the need for a “translation” of communist outlook and program “in the historical language of Italy.” Cited in Vacca, “Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca,” p. 94. Gramsci also expressed this idea in his notes written at the third meeting of the Comintern’s enlarged executive in 1923, and in a letter to Umberto Terracini dated March 27, 1924, which pose the problem of grounding the centralization of the international movement in a genuine national independence. The famous 1926 essay on “Some Aspects of the Southern Question” concretely illustrated the need for the “national translation,” by explaining how, “In Italy the peasant question, through the specific Italian tradition, and the specific development of Italian history, has taken two . . . particular forms—the Southern question and that of the Vatican.” See Hoare (ed.), p. 443. Gramsci returned to this theme in the Notebooks, where he wrote of the need for a careful “reconnaissance” of the nation’s political and social “terrain,” and of how a process of “nationalization” was required for the working class to stake its claim as the leading national class. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (eds.), Selections from the Prison Notebooks (New York: International Publishers, 1971), pp. 238, 241. This uninterrupted strand in Gramsci’s thought was later hijacked by the Italian Stalinists, by presenting it first as an anticipation of the popular front, then of polycentrism. See Spriano, pp. 104–105; Vacca, “Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca,” p. 92. For this reason, the passages from the Notebooks constitute an especially delicate matter, which I will address later in this chapter. 98. Daniele (ed.), Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca. Il carteggio del 1926, p. 293. 99. Trotsky’s 1928 critique of the draft program of the Communist International would later explicitly identify the logical and political contradiction between the slogan of the United Soviet States of Europe and the Stalinist theory of socialism in one country: “We have today a ‘theory’ which teaches that it is possible to build socialism completely in one country and that the correlations of that country with the capitalist world can be established on the basis of ‘neutralizing’ the world bourgeoisie . . . The necessity for the slogan of a United Stated of Europe falls away, or is at least diminished, if this essentially national-reformist . . . point of view is adopted. But this slogan is, from our viewpoint . . . vitally necessary because there is lodged in it the condemnation of the idea of an isolated socialist development.” See Trotsky, The Third International after Lenin, p. 36. Indeed, the slogan of the United Soviet States of Europe, which had been adopted in 1923 after long debates, had started to fade away from Comintern pronouncements precisely as socialism in one country became more entrenched as its guiding strategic outlook. Soon after 1926, with Trotsky finally removed from the party—he had been the main proponent of it—the slogan was dropped altogether. See Trotsky, The Third International after Lenin, p. 327 fn. 14.
100. Vacca notes that, although Gramsci argued for the ties between the prospects of world revolution and of the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union from a very different standpoint, it is significant that the last Italian leader to raise this delicate point had been Bordiga in February 1926, when he engaged Stalin in a direct and exceptionally harsh personal exchange. See Vacca, “Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca,” p. 85. The minutes of the clash between Bordiga and Stalin are published in Daniele (ed.), *Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca. Il carteggio del 1926*, pp. 155–171.


103. Vacca notes that only at Valpolcevera, in the meeting Gramsci could not attend, was the question of socialism in one country finally directly addressed. Ibid., p. 144.


105. Benvenuti and Pons’ argument can be contrasted with Spriano’s dismissive comment on the futility of finding political judgments in the *Notebooks* about the developments in the 1930s. See Spriano, p. 98. It can also be contrasted with Michele Pistillo, who insists that no direct comment on the development of the Soviet Union can be found in the *Notebooks,* presumably implying that the question must be settled strictly on the surface of the text. See Michele Pistillo, “Gramsci, l’Internazionale comunista, lo stalinismo,” in Maria Luisa Righi (ed.), *Gramsci nel Mondo* (Roma: Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, 1995), p. 131.

106. “We believe it necessary to resist the temptation of seeing in Gramsci the full awareness of the historical magnitude of [Stalinism] in all its determinations, which could have been possible only with different opportunities of information and documentation, and a different psychological condition.” Benvenuti and Pons, p. 119.

107. The epigraphs to the first section of chapter two and to the first section of this chapter are examples of the stealthy presence of the Soviet Union in the *Notebooks*. Another example of this textual tendency is the note titled “Riviste tipo” in the first notebook of the Gerratana edition, pp. 27–29. Here, Gramsci moves rapidly from a discussion of journals that focus on book reviews, to the history of the Italian movement “Azione Cattolica.” By the end of the note, Gramsci’s discussion loses its recognizable links to Azione Cattolica, and drifts toward a generic discussion of official congresses and internal democracy that is very suggestive of a reflection on the communist experience.

108. These include both the text published in English as *Historical Materialism—A System of Sociology,* and the later *Theory and Practice from the Standpoint of*
Dialectical Materialism, which Gramsci referred to as the “appendix” to the earlier text. See Gerratana’s note on p. 2943 of the notebooks.


111. Ibid., pp. 1415, 1447.

112. Ibid., p. 1425.

113. Ibid., p. 1426.

114. Ibid., p. 1427.

115. Ibid., pp. 1431–1433.

116. Ibid., p. 1446.

117. Benvenuti and Pons, p. 105.


119. Vacca, *Appuntamenti con Gramsci*, pp. 35, 66 fn. 88. The fact that Stalin was now at the helm of theoretical developments of Soviet Marxism was itself a revealing fact. Stalin had definite talents, but they were quite narrowly limited to the organizational field. He was known as one of the Bolshevik “practicals” before and during 1917, and had little experience or reputation as a theoretician. For a telling anecdote illustrating the reaction to Stalin’s later attempts to theorize, see Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), p. 290.


121. Ibid., pp. 1386–1387.

122. Ibid., p. 1389.

123. Ibid., p. 1388.


126. Ibid., pp. 1612–1613. This note is discussed by Benvenuti and Pons, who conclude, “Gramsci’s attack against collectivization seems to us to be without reservations.” Benvenuti and Pons, pp. 101–102.


128. Gramsci writes in terms of “an initial phase,” “a residual mechanicism.” He describes the process of maturation of Soviet intellectual strata as a “long, difficult” one, full of “contradictions, of advances and retreats,” in such a way as to “put the loyalty of the masses to a difficult test.” See Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, vol. II, p. 1386.

129. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, vol. III, p. 1571. In yet another note which is not discussed by Benvenuti and Pons, Gramsci remarks again on the obsolescence of the fatalistic interpretation of Marxism that prevailed in the Soviet Union: “Concerning the historical function of the fatalistic conception of the philosophy of praxis, one could write a sort of funeral elegy for
it, remembering its usefulness in a specific historical period, but exactly for
this reason demanding that it be finally buried, with honors.” See Gramsci,

130. Benvenuti and Pons, p. 106.

131. It may of course be possible to find or develop a better argument than what
is offered by Benvenuti and Pons on this score. For example, we should note
that the way in which Gramsci qualifies his understanding of the troubling
development of Soviet Marxism as an “inevitable phase,” rather than a deci-
sive break is odd and perhaps suspect, because it itself very much mirrors a
“mechanical,” if not “economistic” schema. This qualification could there-
fore be a mere protective device, part of the cryptic, “aesopic” elements of
the Notebooks. This possibility, which should not be discarded offhand, pro-
vides however a sense of the difficulties involved in interpreting and trying
to come to indisputable conclusions about the meaning of the Notebooks, as
well as the danger that this task could degenerate into a silly, dubious divi-
nation.


133. I am referring here to the breaking off of political discussions that Gramsci
had initiated, as well as the ostracism that he was subjected to by his com-
rades, both of which were a direct consequence of Gramsci’s outspoken disa-
greement about the third period turn.


135. In 1921 Bukharin held these positions voluntarily, though soon after he
would dramatically move to the right wing of the Bolshevik party. In 1931,
Bukharin towed the line of the ultraleft policies of the third period on the
more pragmatic basis of fearing for his life after having been politically
defeated by Stalin. I will soon return to the important question of the iden-
tity of the “theorist of frontal assault,” an expression that Gramsci uses in a

136. A further complication arises from the fact that Gramsci had actually used
Bukharin’s first book in organizing a school for party cadre held in 1925.
See Fabio Frosini, Gramsci e la Filosofia (Roma: Carocci, 2003), p. 105. Fro-
sini deduces from this fact that Gramsci must have changed his appraisal
of Bukharin’s theory while in prison. But this assumes that Gramsci’s cri-
tique of Bukharin in the Notebooks is fundamentally specific and technical,
rather than broad and symbolic, as I have tried to explain in defending
Benvenuti and Pons’ interpretation. The point, to be clear, is not that the
prison Gramsci changed his mind on the specific merits of Bukharin’s text,
or that he did so as part of a general reorientation against Bolshevism.
Rather, Gramsci used Bukharin as cryptic shorthand for the sort of theoreti-
cal approach that manifested itself in the Stalinist third period.

137. There are other proponents of the view that Gramsci’s critique of Bukha-
rin’s texts and theory should be read as a critique of Stalinism. See Vacca,

138. Though unsustainable, these claims have an important, recurrent history in the Italian context, some of which I have already discussed in chapter two. The first and most important turn of Gramsci’s legacy in the direction of “democratic” socialism was undertaken by the PCI under the aegis of the popular front. As I explained, this was the “democratic” face of Stalinism, which however at that time did not let go of the phraseology about revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat. In this sense, as in all the others, Gramsci was not a Stalinist, in spite of the attempts made by the PCI to present him as one. For a good, concise argument explaining why the prison Gramsci did not anticipate the popular front, see Lucio Colletti, “Antonio Gramsci and the Italian Revolution,” New Left Review 65 (January-February 1971), pp. 87–94. Another important attempt to portray Gramsci as a democratic socialist was Giuseppe Tamburrano’s biography, with its farfetched conclusions about Gramsci completely breaking with international communism, developing a liberal-democratic theory of hegemony, and entering the fold of second international reformism. Giuseppe Tamburrano, Antonio Gramsci (Bari: Lacaita, 1963). Although Tamburrano was largely shunned for about a decade, in the 1970s the further evolution of the PCI toward social democracy and its ideological confrontation with the reformist PSI brought some of the same arguments to the fore. At that time, it was PSI intellectuals such as Norberto Bobbio who rightly pointed out the incompatibility of Gramsci with the PCI’s acceptance of (bourgeois) pluralism and democracy, while, as I described in chapter two, the PCI intellectuals found themselves in the unenviable position of having to concoct a democratic, liberal-pluralist interpretation of Gramsci’s texts. It is important to note that this general approach to Gramsci is crucial to the contemporary academic understandings of Gramsci outside of Italy. To name only a few examples, the notion of Gramsci anticipating the popular front surfaces in Geoff Elay’s important recent history of the European left. See Geoff Elay, Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 254. Martin Jay slightly displaces this tendency, insisting that Gramsci was the “legitimate progenitor of Togliatti’s policy of ‘polycentrism.’” Martin Jay, Marxism and Totality (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 162. The problematic of pluralism and democracy was very much inherited, especially via Bobbio, by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (London and New York: Verso, 2001). In yet another variation on this theme, Gramsci can magically appear as a forefather to the academic articulations of middle-class identity politics in the United States. See for example Lisa Lowe, “Heterogeneity,

139. The description and critique of the Stalinized Soviet Union as “totalitarian” was used by Marxists such as Gramsci and Trotsky before it became a liberal commonplace. A large number of Western liberals in the 1930s, as a matter of fact, nurtured fantastic illusions about Stalinism and politically supported it, even at the peak of its terror. I will discuss this in the following chapter.

140. Benvenuti and Pons explain that in the earlier notes Gramsci’s emphasis is on the differences between reactionary and progressive totalitarianism, while in the later notes the emphasis shifts to the similarities. Benvenuti and Pons, p. 110. Trotsky also labeled the Soviet regime “totalitarian” in a similar way: “Trotsky, in employing the term, clearly intended to emphasize the similarities between the Fascist and Stalinist dictatorships.” See Baruch Knei-Paz, The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 410.

141. This is a complex question that, even within the purview of ostensibly Marxist perspectives can be resolved in several different ways. Three examples can be cited. The first is the theory of the Stalinized Soviet Union as a “state capitalist,” and/or “imperialist” formation that is essentially void of any progressive content and deserves no political support. Variants of this theory have been put forth by Karl Korsch, James Burnham, Max Shachtman, and later C.L.R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, Tony Cliff, Alex Callinicos and Samir Amin. The second is the mature Trotsky’s call for unconditional defense of the Soviet Union and its social foundation against imperialism, paired to a call for political revolution against the Stalinist regime. The third is the notion of the progressive potential and possibility of self-reform of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which was originally elaborated by Isaac Deutscher and defended by certain offshoots of the Trotskyist movement. I will discuss this question in chapter five.

142. “We know that Gramsci supported the essential elements of Bolshevik authoritarianism, which he considered within the context of a system of checks and balances that he deemed capable of preserving the propulsive impetus of the revolution (something that in 1926 he described as the “formidable element of revolutionary organization and propulsion”). It is the loss of this later perspective that delineates, from his standpoint, an involution in the Soviet Union.” Benvenuti and Pons, p. 114.


144. The other, far less plausible candidate here would be the Paris Commune, which did not last long enough to indulge in statolatry or any other kind of sustained developmental phase.

147. Ibid., p. 107.
148. In this respect Gramsci’s critique dovetailed in the arguments raised and fought for by the Left Opposition since 1923. Benvenuti and Pons register this similarity by arguing that Gramsci’s general orientation in the Notebooks very much evokes Trotsky’s earliest critique of bureaucratism and the stifling of democracy developed in The New Course. Benvenuti and Pons, p. 120. I will discuss Trotsky’s critique in some detail in chapter five.
150. Ibid., pp. 1601–1602. Benvenuti and Pons do not discuss this.
151. Ibid., p. 1692.
152. Ibid., p. 1692.
153. Gramsci’s distinction between democratic and bureaucratic centralism is also developed in another note, which explains how the former required “the organic unity between theory and practice, between intellectuals and popular masses, rulers and ruled,” while in the latter, “there is no unity, but a stagnant swamp, calm and ‘silent’ on the surface.” Ibid., p. 1635. This distinction had a long history of political saliency, going back at least to the early debates on the organizational question between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. But the distinction was potentially well suited to dissect and expose the specific degeneration represented by Stalinism. Trotsky deployed it in just this way: “What is the meaning of this idea of revolutionary order . . . which stands above the ideas of democracy and centralism? It implies . . . a self-sufficing bureaucracy which is supposed to preserve ‘order’ independently of the party masses . . . we have had offered us a whole series of definitions of party democracy by the . . . representatives of the party leadership which in essence reduced it to mean that democracy and centralism are simply submission to higher organs . . . But centralism accompanied by strangled and hollow democracy is bureaucratic centralism.” Trotsky, pp. 161–162. Benvenuti and Pons, however, express serious doubts about whether Gramsci’s use of this distinction is best interpreted as a commentary on Soviet development rather than as a reference to “ideal types of politics.” Benvenuti and Pons, p. 111. Hoare is also skeptical about reading in Gramsci’s discussion of centralism a commentary on the developments in the Soviet Union. See Hoare and Nowell Smith (eds.), p. 187, fn. 83. It is not clear why these objections are raised, particularly by Benvenuti and Pons, who well understand Gramsci’s constraints and habits in dealing with the Soviet Union in the notebooks. Though Gramsci is never unequivocally direct about the pertinent historical and geographical context of this kind of discussions, in the passage just cited he is discussing “Those parties that represent socially subaltern groups . . .” in a way that leaves little to the imagination. Gramsci, Quaderni del carcere, vol. III, p. 1634.
154. Ibid., p. 1946.
155. Gramsci is rather specific here about the Soviet context, making clear that he is discussing a party that develops into a state in “integral” fashion, not in the sense of a mere participation in a parliamentary government. Ibid., p. 1947.

156. Ibid., p. 1947.

157. This echoes his already cited warning to Togliatti in 1926 that the march toward socialism of the Russian party should not be thought of as “acquired once and for all in a stable form,” but was, on the contrary, “always unstable.” See Daniele (ed.), Gramsci a Roma, Togliatti a Mosca. Il carteggio del 1926, p. 435.


159. Benvenuti and Pons usefully note that Gramsci’s complaint against “fanaticism” echoes his critique of the excessive and permanent “statolatry.” See Benvenuti and Pons, p. 112. They also argue that the use of certain key terms in other notes provides additional circumstantial evidence that the target of Gramsci’s critique is indeed third period Stalinism. The first is a reference to “self-criticism” as an ineffective, ritualistic substitute to actual democracy. Ibid., p. 103. While “self-criticism,” beginning with Marx himself, had always been part of the Marxist vocabulary when discussing the need for revolutionaries to be self-reflexive, with the onset of the third period, starting with a series of “appeals” published in June 1928 in Pravda, it became a notorious Stalinist shibboleth. The second is Gramsci’s allusion to the “verification of the execution,” which, as Benvenuti and Pons explain, was a specifically Stalinist concept. Ibid., p. 113.


161. Ibid., pp. 1769–1771.

162. Ibid., p. 1771.

163. Ibid., p. 1939.

164. Ibid., p. 1939. Gramsci’s description is very perceptive, applying nicely, for example, to the peculiar dynamics of the Stalinist purges, whereby “Trotskyism” became an ever-present, yet ghostly menace and the catch-all explanation for fascist, imperialist, and social democratic plots, assassinations, industrial sabotage, and economic failures.

165. Ibid., p. 1743.

166. Ibid., p. 1944.

167. One exception is a note in which Gramsci approvingly recalls a book review written by Trotsky in 1914 and published by Gramsci in 1918 as the editor of the weekly “Grido del Popolo.” Gramsci, Quaderni del carcere, vol. II, p. 893.

168. This applied to states, parties, as well individuals. Trotsky’s travails and travels as a political refugee, for example, became a matter of international and political relations of the highest order, as was quickly learned under Stalinist pressure by his various host countries and governments.
169. Though in the most direct sense the third period was a maneuver against Bukharin, the leader of the right wing could not possibly play the same role. Bukharin was in fact briefly expelled from the party, but soon “repented,” was brought back into fold of the party only to be dragged through a series of humiliations that only concluded with his execution in 1938.

170. Examples of this attitude are found in Spriano, p. 67; and Jay, p. 163.


172. Ibid., pp. 865–867.


174. This caricature is well described in Deutscher’s account of the initial barrage of attacks against Trotsky: “It fixed in the public mind a contradictory image of Trotsky as, on the one hand, an inveterate semi-Menshevik and, on the other, an equally inveterate ‘ultra radical’ and extremist seeking to involve the party in dangerous ventures at home and abroad. At home, it was said, he strove to embroil the Bolsheviks with the peasants whom he had never understood. Abroad, he always saw revolutionary opportunities where none existed. That Trotsky had also criticized Zinoviev for encouraging abortive risings abroad, that he had been opposed to the march on Warsaw in 1920, that he had consistently striven to normalize relations with the capitalist countries, and that he had been the first to advocate the N.E.P. policy in order to pacify the peasants—these and similar facts which contradicted the image of the ultra radical adventurer did not matter. Fact, fiction, and scholastic quibble were so jumbled together that Trotsky became the Quixote of communism, pathetic perhaps, but also dangerous, whom only the wisdom and the statesmanship of the triumvirs could restrain and render harmless.” See Isaac Deutscher, The Prophet Unarmed (London: Verso, 2003), p. 131


177. Pistillo, p.129.

178. This is not to say that these notes do not have also a theoretical content and significance, or that there are no elements in Gramsci’s analysis that lend themselves to reformist uses. For an insightful analysis of the promise and limits of Gramsci’s war of position, and how it did serve as one of the most important sources for the political pessimism of Western Marxism, see Anderson, “The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci,” pp. 69–72.

179. “The link between ‘bonapartism’ and the ‘general theory of permanent revolution’ . . . may appear as the critique of a Trotskyist notion, but in fact quite plausibly targets Stalin and the Comintern’s political line after 1929 . . . It seems to us implausibly restrictive to see in these gramscian notes a mere reflection on political struggles that took place a decade earlier, and not also an attempt to put forth a framework to understand the prospects
facing the international communist movement and the USSR in the early 1930s.” Benvenuti and Pons, p. 119. See also pp. 108–109, 119.


182. Trotsky recalled how Gramsci, who was initially supportive of Bordiga’s ultraleft line on this score, vacillated throughout that period: “We had to press him a lot . . . to convince him to take a position of struggle against Bordiga, and I don’t know whether we have succeeded.” Cited in Paul Piccone, *Italian Marxism* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983), p. 145. Having taken the leadership of the party, Gramsci would later equivocate or even deny his initial opposition to the united front. See Gramsci’s February 9, 1924 letter to Terracini and the useful commentary in Hoare (ed.), pp. 191, 203, 469–470 fn. 54, 481 fn. 112.

183. For an account of the effect of Trotsky’s intervention at the Fourth Congress of the Comintern on Gramsci, see Bergami, p. 27. See also Corvisieri, pp. 22–23.

184. For Trotsky’s account of the significance of the united front turn at the Third Congress of the Comintern, and the struggle against Bukharin, see Trotsky, *The Third International after Lenin*, pp. 104–107; 336–337 fn. 31.


186. Hoare and Nowell Smith (eds.), p. 236 fn. 35.


188. The idea of Trotsky as theorist of frontal assault also circulated in bourgeois circles. The writer Curzio Malaparte, for example, described the October coup as a triumph of Trotsky’s tactic over Lenin’s strategy. Malaparte was the subject of Trotsky’s fulminations in Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2001), p. 1141. Gramsci also attacked Malaparte in the *Notebooks*, though for different reasons. See Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, vol. II, p. 1056.

189. For a discussion of this point, see Catone, pp. 48–68. It should also be noted that on the question of the analysis of fascism, particularly in response to the disastrous strategy adopted in the Stalinist third period, Gramsci and Trotsky arrived independently at similar conclusions. Both of them criticized the idea of leaping directly form fascism to a socialist revolution as a counter-productive ultralefist delusion, and insisted on the necessity of democratic slogans and on the likelihood of a democratic intermediate phase. See Bergami, pp. 64–66. Ferdinando Ormea, *Le origini dello stalinismo nel PCI* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1978), pp. 241–243.

190. My analysis of the presence of Trotsky in the *Notebooks* does not imply that Gramsci was in political agreement with him as a sort of crypto-Trotskyist. The point, rather, is that there is sufficient evidence to believe that Gramsci’s main intent was not to parrot the vulgar Stalinist criticism of Trotsky, and that as a whole his political positions were neither Stalinist nor Trotskyist.
From this standpoint, the complex way in which the Italian adherents of Trotsky's Left Opposition dealt with the imprisoned Gramsci is historically noteworthy. For a collection of pertinent documents, see Roberto Massari (ed.) All’opposizione nel Pci con Trotsky e Gramsci. Bollettino dell’Opposizione Comunista Italiana (1931–1933) (Bolsena: Massari editore, 2004).

191. These oscillations were an important reason for Trotsky's initial characterization of Stalinism as a form of "centrism." In addition, in hindsight it can be argued that the third period, though crucial from the standpoint of the defeats of the communist movement especially in Germany, was not the most lasting and influential programmatic legacy of Stalinism. It was instead the inter-classism of the popular front, which had an important influence in national liberation movements in the ex-colonies, and still dominates the outlook of the Stalinist parties in the advanced capitalist countries.

192. Joseph Femia's analysis of Gramsci's understanding of the bureaucratic danger in the Soviet Union simultaneously overestimates its insights in comparison to other Marxists and misrepresents it as a quasi-Weberian construct: “Other Marxist thinkers, like Luxemburg and Trotsky, had articulated a fear of bureaucracy in the revolutionary party, but Gramsci was the first to confront bureaucracy as a universal problem.” Joseph Femia, Gramsci’s Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p 158. Emphasis in the original. As I will explain in chapter five, Trotsky developed not a psychological anxiety about the bureaucracy, but a remarkable Marxist theory of bureaucratism, as a phenomenon connected to the consolidation of Stalinism. Gramsci’s argument, which in any case approximated in content as well as form Trotsky’s 1923 critique of bureaucratism, was in comparison very limited. I will briefly return to this comparison in chapter five, footnote 45. More generally, the weaknesses of Femia’s approach to Gramsci are manifold—from its disingenuous reproach of politically inspired interpretations to a superficial and tendentious account of “Leninism.” Indeed, in spite of certain recurring self-characterizations, it is not possible to regard Femia’s work as belonging in the same category as the projects of Marxist reclamation described in chapter two of this book. With respect to the question I have discussed at the end of this chapter, it should be noted that Femia fails to see through the peculiar function played by Trotsky in the Notebooks, and takes at face value Gramsci’s attacks against crude theoretical conceptions and authoritarian tendencies that, as I have showed, were in fact aimed in a very different direction. See Femia, pp. 51, 277 fn. 56.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

2. “The collapse, its timing and the speed with which it happened took politicians, Sovietologists and the media by surprise . . . The failure to foresee the
Soviet collapse was common to the entire intelligence community: from the CIA . . . through the Israeli Mossad, the British M16, the French DGSE, the Italian SIM.” David Arbel and Ran Edelist, *Western Intelligence and the Collapse of the Soviet Union 1980–1990* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003), pp. xi-xii.


6. See David Caute, *The Fellow-Travellers: Intellectual Friends of Communism.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). Caute provides an informative and wide-ranging account of the fantastic delusions, political complicity, and peculiar psychology of Western intellectual fellow-travelers. This fascinating milieu attracted liberals, socialists and semi-socialists of all tinges, and even Menshevik exiles. In many cases these were people who had remained skeptically silent or expressed horror during Red October, only to rejoice and trumpet the virtues of the Soviet Union at a rate closely approximating that of its Stalinization. The political trajectory of Sidney and Beatrice Webb is a good example of this tendency. See Caute, pp. 87–89.


9. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1944). To give a sense of the tone and content of this book, in the first few pages one learns that “Stalin is not a dictator,” “the Communist Party . . . is not an oligarchy . . . it is democratic in its internal structure,” “the USSR is the most inclusive and equalised democracy in the world,” “if equal rights to all races within a sovereign state is a necessary characteristic of political democracy, the USSR stands out as a champion of this form of liberty,” and finally that the “Treason Trials” had proven that “old Bolshevik comrades of Lenin and opponents of Stalin’s subsequent policy . . . had begun to intrigue with the German Army against the new social order of the Soviet Union.” Ibid., pp. xix-xxi, xliii-xliv. All this was written in the new 1942 introduction to the book, at a time when
the political ravages of the show trials and purges, the horrors of forced collectivization and famine of the 1930s were relatively fresh, and the forced relocation of many Caucasian nationalities was about to begin.

10. A few excerpts from Davies’ reports from Moscow are worth quoting here as a useful illustration, not of the personal discernment of the author, which as a whole compares unfavorably with that of a rock, but of the attitude characteristic of so many well-educated and respected Western figures: “Naturally I must confess that I was predisposed against the credibility of the testimony of these defendants. The unanimity of their confessions, the fact of their long imprisonment . . . with the possibility of duress and coercion extending to themselves or their families, all gave me grave doubts as to the reliability that could attach to the statements. Viewed objectively, however, and based upon my experience in the trial of cases and the application of the tests of credibility which past experience has afforded me, I arrive at the reluctant conclusion that the state had established its case, at least to the extent of proving the existence of a widespread conspiracy and plot among the political leaders against the Soviet government, and which under their statutes established the crimes set forth in the indictment . . . I am still impressed with the many indications of credibility which obtained in the course of testimony. To have assumed that this proceeding was invented and staged as a project of dramatic political fiction would be to presuppose the creative genius of a Shakespeare and the genius of a Belasco in stage production . . . The manner of testifying of various accused and their bearing on the stand also had weight with me. . . . [a] consistent vein of truth ran through the fabric, establishing a definite political conspiracy to overthrow the present government. . . . I have talked to many, if not all, of the members of the Diplomatic Corps here and, with possibly one exception, they are all of the opinion that the proceedings established clearly the existence of a political plot and conspiracy to overthrow the government.” Joseph E. Davies, Mission to Moscow (New York: Pocket Books, 1943), pp. 38–39. For a recent, informative account of the trials, as well as Trotsky’s ability to expose them for what they were, see Vladimir Rogovin, 1937: Stalin’s Year of Terror (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 1998).


15. Ernest Mandel, Trotsky as Alternative, p. 50.

16. Examples of these films include Frank Capra’s Why We Fight World War II, and Jacques Tourneur’s Days of Glory.
17. Irving Howe’s book on Trotsky, written long after the author had decisively distanced himself politically from him provides a poignant and honest reminder of this strange, and now conveniently forgotten period. Remark- ing on the scope and intensity of Trotsky’s critique of Stalinism, Howe asks “Is there another instance in modern history where a powerful mind directed itself with such persistence and passion to exposing the false claims of a regime that still commanded the loyalties of millions of people throughout the world?” Irving Howe, *Leon Trotsky* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), p. 121. “Though contemporary students of totalitarianism may diverge at crucial points with Trotsky, almost all of them owe him a large debt. For it was he who first struggled with the problems of Stalinist totalitarianism, he who suffered ridicule and contempt, not only from befuddled fellow travelers but also from willfully enraptured liberals who refused to believe the simple, but, for them, unbearable truths about Stalinism” (p. 122). “Time blurs memories; the shame of those years is covered by apologia. It becomes acutely urgent to remember that a good portion of the Western liberal and radical intelligentsia was celebrating the wisdom and humanity of the Stalin dictatorship—some of these people did not acknowledge the truth about the Moscow trials until Nikita Khrushchev finally revealed it in 1956, and then only because it was he who revealed it. All through the 1930s Trotsky stood almost alone in pointing to the facts—for they were facts—about the Stalin regime” (pp. 134–135). “Their [the Stalinist parties’] propaganda was often aided by liberals who had come to admire the Soviet Union only after it had entered its totalitarian phase and by conservatives delighted with the ‘disci- pline’ the Kremlin dictator exacted. Throughout the world large numbers of distinguished writers and intellectuals rushed to the defense of the dictatorship, finding both crude and subtle reasons to endorse the trials” (p. 162).


20. Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 3 vol. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978). For these services, Kolakowski has recently been awarded the first John W. Kulge Prize for Life Achievement in the Humanities and Social Sciences, amounting to $1 million.


22. “[I]t is precisely the international strength of the United States and her irresistible expansion arising from it, that compels her to include the powder magazines of the whole world into the foundations of her structure, i.e., all the antagonisms between East and West, the class struggle in Old Europe, the uprising of the colonial people, and all wars and revolutions.” Leon

23. See John Molyneux, *Leon Trotsky’s Theory of Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), p. 42. The massacre was no mere temporary setback on the way to the eventual victory of the Chinese revolution. Its real significance was the permanent reorientation of the Chinese revolutionary movement away from the urban proletariat, enabling the rise of Maoism as a peasant-oriented variant of Stalinism. The damage inflicted by this event thus far exceeds its immediate human costs, and is still being felt today.


29. Ibid., p. 196.

30. Quoted in Norman Geras, “Marxists before the Holocaust: Trotsky, Deutscher, Mandel” in Gilbert Achar (ed.), *The Legacy of Ernest Mandel* (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 191–213. Geras notes that Trotsky issued his warning “before Hitler’s famous Reichstag speech of January 30, 1939 in which he ‘prophesied’ the annihilation of European Jewry.” Geras thus writes that Trotsky’s prediction ought to be considered “an astonishing fact . . . For it is a common and well-grounded theme in the literature of the Holocaust that the disaster was not really predictable.” In spite of Hitler’s explicit statement, which Trotsky anticipated, “Even once the tragedy began to unfold, many people found the information on what was being done to the Jews hard to absorb, hard to connect up into a unified picture of comprehensive genocide, hard to believe.” Ibid., p. 191.

31. Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism*, p. 58. For an account of Stalin’s mesmerizing blindness to the impending conflict with Germany, see Medvedev, pp. 446–454.


34. Ibid., p. 197.

35. Ibid., p. 245. The full import of Trotsky’s insight on this point could only be appreciated once it became clear that Gorbachev’s reforms would lead to the restoration of capitalism in Russia. In an interesting analysis written during the last stages of this process, R.W. Davies noted that, “Until a year or two ago, Trotsky’s prediction in *Revolution Betrayed* that state bureaucrats

36. Trotsky, The Revolution Betrayed, p. 215. Trotsky had also clearly identified the fundamental limit that a Stalinized economic development of the Soviet Union would not be able to overcome, in spite of its costly and relative success in industrializing: “The ulcers of bureaucratism are perhaps not so obvious in the big industries, but they are devouring . . . the light and food-producing industries, . . . the small local industries—that is, all those branches of economy that stand nearest to the people. The progressive role of the Soviet bureaucracy coincides with the period devoted to introducing into the Soviet Union the most important elements of capitalist technique . . . It is possible to build gigantic factories according to a ready-made Western pattern by bureaucratic command—although, to be sure, at triple the normal cost. But the further you go, the more the economy runs into the problem of quality, which slips out of the hands of a bureaucracy like a shadow. The Soviet products are as though branded with the grey label of indifference. Under a nationalized economy, quality demands a democracy of producers and consumers, freedom of criticism and initiative—conditions incompatible with a totalitarian regime of fear, lies and flattery.” Ibid., p. 235.

37. Ibid., p. 213. It is widely estimated that in a few years of shock capitalist therapy the GNP of the Soviet Union was cut into half. The social consequences of the restoration of capitalism in Russia in terms of inequality, poverty, life expectancy, health care, etc. were and remain devastating. In terms of culture, a casual stroll through the streets of Moscow should provide satisfactory evidence of decline.

38. It is possible, for example, that a correct prediction could spring from an entirely mistaken analysis, method, or perspective, and thus be correct by accident, and only in a superficial and formal sense. The young Trotsky’s prediction in his 1904 “Our Political Tasks,” that Lenin’s approach to the party organization of Russian Marxism would automatically have disastrous consequences—“The party organization is substituted for the party, the Central Committee is substituted for the party organization, and finally a ‘dictator’ is substituted for the Central Committee”—is a good example of this sort of prediction, as will be discussed in chapter five. Leon Trotsky, “Our Political Tasks” Robert Daniels ed., A Documentary History of Communism, vol. I. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1984), p. 21.

39. “On several occasions Trotsky took up a diary, but this most intimate form of communication was filled with accounts of revolutionary struggle. Reading a


41. Ibid., p. 177.


43. For an assessment of Trotsky’s writings on fascism as a brilliant, lost treasure of Marxism, see Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: NLB, 1977), p. 97; Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast*, p. 105; Howe, p. 136. More decisive praise for Trotsky’s analysis comes from Renzo De Felice, the most prominent Italian scholar of fascism who politically shares nothing with Marxism in general and Trotsky in particular. According to De Felice, Trotsky’s analysis of fascism constituted a serious theoretical and political alternative to the positions that became entrenched in the Third International along with Stalinism. Trotsky’s analysis of fascism was “far less schematic than that of the Third International. It was deeper and more sophisticated. Having seriously studied the Italian events and the early mistakes and misunderstandings of the Italian communists, he understood the decisive role played by the petty bourgeoisie in those events, and repeatedly warned against repeating them in Germany.” Renzo De Felice, *Le interpretazioni del fascismo* (Bari: Laterza, 1998), p. 75. Furthermore, after the Stalinists had reduced fascism to the political expression of finance capital, “the only people in the communist movement who continued to stress the importance of a correct understanding of the role of the petty bourgeoisie in the rise and consolidation of Fascism in Italy and Germany (and, consequently, of the political importance of this question in terms of the communist strategy in those counties threatened by Fascism) were the Trotskyists.” Ibid., p. 74.

45. Of all the figures that are part of the canon of political theory, Machiavelli is the one that presents some suggestive parallels with Trotsky. These parallels have to do with some of the essential facts concerning their life as well as their writing. For a considerable time, Machiavelli was engaged in the tasks of statecraft, negotiating alliances and organizing militias. He was later cast out of this world and condemned to a sort of political solitude at the margins of the great event of his epoch. But he did not submit to this condition, continuing to struggle to find a way back into the center-stage of politics, and continuing to elucidate the historical tasks of the epoch as an outsider. Machiavelli’s writing, like Trotsky’s, spanned a tremendous range, from military doctrine to art. Like Trotsky, he also wrote a masterful work of history. The mode of theorizing characteristic of Machiavelli’s political writing could hardly be described as philosophical. Instead, it is characterized by a remarkable concreteness. As the case of The Prince makes clear, even the conceptual abstractions and generalities employed by Machiavelli always seem to fold around the pressing tasks of the epoch. At the same time, this political work managed to rise above the specific conjuncture of its own epoch.

46. “At the core of the analytical framework in Political Man is . . . an apolitical Marxist analysis. By [this] I mean reliance on some Marxist theoretical and methodological assumptions without acceptance of Marx’s conclusion that socialism is an inevitable and preferable successor to capitalism.” Seymour Martin Lipset, Political Man (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 459. Lipset’s reference to the “inevitability” of socialism he rejects is itself one step removed from the political activism of Marx.


48. “Marx excoriated contemporary socialists for their delusions about the prospect of achieving socialism. Yet these delusions reappeared after his death, and had murderous consequences after 1917. That sad, violent and barbaric episode in the world’s history is over. Marx has had his revenge.” “The younger revolutionaries, especially in mainland Europe . . . read him voraciously, and took his theories very seriously. They made his theories into an ideology—Marxism—causing him to make his famous remark that as far as he knew, he was not a Marxist. They wanted formulas and recipes for change. They were impatient to overthrow what he had taught them was an oppressive system prone to crisis. But he would not oblige. When the German Social Democrats formed a political party claiming allegiance to his ideas, he severely criticized their political programme.” “The demise of the socialist experiment inaugurated by October 1917 would not distress but cheer Karl Marx.” Meghnad Desai, Marx’s Revenge (London: Verso, 2002). pp. 315, 7, 3.

50. “We would be tempted to distinguish the spirit of the Marxist critique, which seems to be more indispensable than ever today, at once from Marxism as ontology, philosophical or metaphysical system, as ‘dialectical materialism,’ from Marxism as historical materialism or method, and from Marxism incorporated in the apparatuses of party, State, or workers’ International.” Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 68. To make sense of Derrida’s curious allegiance, one is in turn tempted to borrow Caute’s caustic remark about a different French intellectual, Romain Rolland: “Fastidious and aloof, perpetually washing his hands of the grime of human nature, he returned to the internationale de l’esprit. This was the one international which bore no number; it was sublime and timeless.” Caute, p. 136. For two sparkling critiques of this aspect of Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, see Terry Eagleton, “Marxism without Marxism” in Michael Sprinker, (ed). *Ghostly Demarcations* (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 83–87; Aijaz Ahmad, “Reconciling Derrida: ‘Specters of Marx’ and Deconstructive Politics” in *Ghostly Demarcations*, pp. 88–109. It should be noted that elsewhere in *Specters of Marx* Derrida seems to express his opposition to a purely academic treatment of Marx (Derrida, p. 32). But Derrida expresses many things, and his preference for a depoliticized Marx emerges primarily not out of the deconstruction of his contradictory text, but by considering how thoroughly and flamboyantly academic his life as “theorist” was, his pathological addiction to literary conceits, and the self-conscious and self-satisfied “impractical” character of his writing—all of this capped by the ridiculous claim that deconstruction constitutes a radicalization of Marxism (p. 92). Against this, Marx’s streak of plebian hatred not for “theory” as such, but for the happy uselessness of the petty-bourgeois, would have protested—briefly—then moved on to more politically serious things.


52. This cross-disciplinary tendency to free Marx from his Marxism often refers to (or at least draws spiritual sustenance from) Marx’s famous comment that he himself was not a Marxist. For example, see Desai, pp. 6, 39 and Derrida, p. 88. In so doing, this tendency only demonstrates its distance from and inability to understand Marx as a political actor. Marx’s statement was not the exasperated cry of the scholar recoiling from the banalities of political struggle. On the contrary, it was an expression of his severe and demanding attitude in political matters, specifically against the ideological weakness and superficiality of many of his French sympathizers (some things never change). I should note that there are of course important exceptions to the general tendency to depoliticize Marx. The work of Hal Draper and, more recently, August Nimtz stands out in this regard. See Hal Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution, Vols. I-IV* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977–1990); August Nimtz, *Marx and Engels* (Albany: State
University of New York Press, 2000); August Nimtz, *Marx, Tocqueville, and Race in America: The ‘Absolute Democracy’ or ‘Defiled Republic’* (Lanham, UK: Lexington Books, 2003). Arthur Prinz’s article on the political context of Marx’s famous 1859 preface to “A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy” also deserves to be mentioned here, since it addresses the text that has most often served as the pivot used to de-politicize Marx, Arthur Prinz, “Background and Ulterior Motive of Marx’s ‘Preface’ of 1859,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 30, no. 3 (July-September, 1969), pp. 437–450.

53. See chapters one and two above.

54. Michael Burawoy provides a revealing testimony of the general attitude toward Trotsky in academia. At the end of an article in which he sought to demonstrate the superiority of Trotsky’s work to Theda Skocpol’s, strictly on the plane of social science, Burawoy explains the reception of his efforts by his own students who “greeted it with bewilderment, dismay, and even horror,” and a series of exhausting exchanges with a “battalion of six referees” in a futile attempt to publish the manuscript in the flagship journal of his discipline. Michael Burawoy, “Two Methods in Search of Science: Skocpol versus Trotsky,” *Theory and Society* 18 (1989), p. 796. Borrowing a line from Trotsky, in a less tactful mood Burawoy might have said that his attempt to present Trotsky as an alternative for social science “produced about the same sort of impression as a stone thrown into a puddle alive with pompous and phlegmatic frogs.” Leon Trotsky, *My Life* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1994), p. 276.


57. This is one of the famous passages from the *Communist Manifesto*, which refers specifically to the role expected from the bourgeoisie of the advanced capitalist countries. The question of the relation between Trotsky’s uneven and combined development and Marx and Engels’ understanding of capitalism is a complex one. Some of the canonical quotations from Marx and Engels convey a mechanical, stage-ist understanding of the development of capitalism at the periphery. One example is a famous passage from the preface to the
first German edition of *Capital*, vol. I: “The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.” Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I. (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 91. The full picture of Marx and Engels’ understanding of this question is, however, far more complex. In general, the two actually tended to move away from such mechanistic notions, and towards an approximation of uneven and combined development. This trajectory can be measured, for example, by the important change in their assessment of the effects of English capitalism in India. For a discussion of these issues, see August Nimtz, “The Eurocentric Marx and Engels and Other Related Myths,” in Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (eds.) *Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonial Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). In any case, Trotsky was aware of this strain of mechanistic thinking in Marx and Engels’ thought—one that became magnified in the political weaknesses and failures of the Second International—and fought to defuse it. For example, addressing the well-known passage in *Capital’s* preface, Trotsky insisted that, “Under no circumstances can this thought be taken literally.” Leon Trotsky, “Karl Marx,” introduction to *The Living Thoughts of Karl Marx. Based on Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Cassell, 1940), p. 40. See also Leon Trotsky, *The New Course* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), p. 52.

58. Trotsky’s analysis of the social and economic conditions in Russia at the turn of the century has stood the test of specialized scholarship. See Thatcher, *Trotsky*, pp. 36–42.

59. As in the case of uneven and combined development, Trotsky’s position was not wholly new, but developed and systematized those elements of Marx and Engels’ perspective that were least amenable to determinist and mechanical formulations. “Permanent revolution” appears as a political slogan in the March 1850 address. See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League,” in Karl Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848. Political Writings: Volume 1*. (London: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 319–330.

60. This achievement certainly owed something to Trotsky’s collaboration with Alexander Helphand (“Parvus”). See Trotsky, *My Life* pp. 167–168. Parvus’ early revolutionary insight lapsed, however, giving way to conventional and conservative positions, particularly with the coming of World War I. During the war he supported German imperialism, not just in theory, but also by personally arranging a profitable arms trade with it. Trotsky’s achievement may also owe something to a statement found in a political manifesto written in March 1898 by Peter Struve on the occasion of the first political congress in the formative stages of Russian Social Democracy. The statement reads: “The farther east we go in Europe, the weaker, more cowardly and abject does the bourgeoisie become politically, and the more do its cultural and political tasks devolve upon the proletariat.” Cited
and discussed in Bertram Wolfe, *Three Who Made a Revolution* (New York: Delta Books, 1964), p. 139. This insight, however, was a mere rhetorical flash in Struve’s short and undistinguished career as a revolutionary, which in general was characterized by a political orientation of a very different sign. Struve ushered in the conservative and contemplative Russian tradition of “legal Marxism” in 1894, and abandoned revolutionary positions altogether shortly after writing the manifesto, drifting first toward liberalism, then monarchism and the Orthodox Church.


62. For a discussion of Antonio Gramsci’s rejection of this sort of indexing, see chapter three above.

63. See Knei-Paz, pp. 94 fn. 92, 98.


65. Louis Althusser opposed this concept to the Hegelian one of a “continuous and homogeneous time,” and presented it as a necessary scientific breakthrough against the “ideology of time.” See chapter four of Althusser’s *Reading Capital* (London: Verso, 1997), pp. 91–118. The fact that Alex Callinicos, one of the most recognizable names associated with “Trotskyism,” stated that Althusser actually “pioneered the idea,” is striking and symptomatic of the fate of Trotsky’s insight. See Alex Callinicos, review of “A Marx for Our Times: Adventures and Misadventures of a Critique” in *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 3 (Sept. 2003), pp 580–581.


67. For a list of other “applications” of Trotsky’s concept see Knei-Paz, pp. 98–99 fn. 93, 583 fn. 6.

68. Stalin used the concept to buttress the theory of socialism in one country, essentially claiming that the “unevenness” of development enabled the rise of socialism in the Soviet Union independently of the world economy. The value of the concept in this particular context, on the contrary, was exactly the insistence on the inescapable interconnectedness between the Soviet and world economy, and the impossibility of creating socialism on a national basis. See Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution*, pp. 148–153.


70. Neil Smith, writing in the shadow of Harvey’s argument, does recognize and acknowledge Trotsky’s historical contribution, and in addition notes how this legacy came to be obscured after the struggle against Stalinism. Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (New York: Blackwell, 1984), pp. xiv, 191. There is something odd, however, about Smith’s account of what he deems the inadequate early Marxist attempts to theorize uneven development as a specifically economic
phenomenon. This account arbitrarily excludes Trotsky by segregating his contribution as more strictly “political,” as opposed not just to Smith’s own, but to Marx, Luxemburg and Lenin as well. Ibid., pp. 93–96. It is particularly odd that Smith would single out the latter’s The Development of Capitalism in Russia as the most advanced Marxist attempt to theorize the phenomenon, by virtue of its keen awareness “of the internal differentiation of space which accompanied the expansion of capital,” and of the contradiction between “the increased differentiation of space on the one hand, and the equalizing tendency of capital, toward the emancipation of space, on the other” Ibid., pp. 95–96. In many ways, in fact, Lenin’s text displayed a tendency typical of early Russian Marxism when engaged in polemics with the agrarian populists: the conviction that capitalism would in fact impress its typical Western template on the socioeconomic relations at the periphery. In this respect, Trotsky’s 1905 and Results and Prospects, addressed the “political” as well as the “economic” in terms that are more consistent with Smith’s description. Smith’s tendency to portray the discipline of geography as a sort of deus ex machina for Marxism’s conceptual difficulties, finally, reveals a disarming innocence concerning the knotty problem of the political standing and mode of production of academic knowledge.


72. The academic literature that in one way or another pivots on a rejection of Lenin and “Leninism” is enormous, even leaving aside the now forgotten classics of Sovietology. One well-known example from political science is James Scott, Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).


75. Trotsky “held that Stalinism, having no social base, must collapse at any moment and that its only possible and natural heirs would be the ‘Bolshevik Leninist’ who would restore the Comintern to its true purpose;” “Trotsky continued to believe that . . . the ruling bureaucracy lacked . . . any social base;” “Trotsky [insisted] that the bureaucracy was not a class but only an excrescence on the healthy body of socialism;” “Stalin’s . . . apparatus represented nothing and no one;” “the bureaucracy continued to maintain itself without any visible social foundation.” Kolakowski, Main Currents of Marxism, vol. 3, pp. 184, 186, 187, 193, 194.

76. “At times [Trotsky] maintained that the chief cause of degeneration was the delay in the outbreak of the world revolution . . . on the other hand, he maintained equally often that the defeat of the revolution in Europe
was the fault of the Soviet bureaucracy. It thus remained in doubt which phenomenon was the cause and which the effect.” Ibid., p. 192. “[Trotsky] saw nothing reprehensible in the socialist state bringing the ‘proletarian revolution’ to other countries by means of armed invasion . . . True, this was a revolution of a ‘special kind,’ since it was introduced at the point of the bayonet and did not spring from the depths of popular feeling, but it was a genuine revolution all the same.” Ibid., p. 201.

77. The second argument rests on a formal logical contradiction that has \textit{prima facie} validity, and invests more fully Trotsky’s method, so that it is best deferred to the discussion of Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinism developed in the next chapter.

78. For example: “The \textit{basis for bureaucratic rule} is the poverty of society in objects of consumption with the resulting struggle of each against all. Such is the starting point of the Soviet bureaucracy. It knows who is to get something and who has to wait.” Trotsky, \textit{Revolution Betrayed}, p. 112. I will discuss whether Trotsky’s analysis of Stalinism is a coherent and adequate account of the phenomenon and its standing as a Marxist theoretical construct in the next chapter.

79. “There was never any such thing as a Trotskyist theory—only a deposed leader who tried desperately to recover his role, who could not realize that his efforts were in vain, and who would not accept responsibility.” Kolakowski, \textit{Main Currents of Marxism}, vol. 3. p. 219. “Trotsky’s attitude to the Soviet state is psychologically understandable: it was to a large extent his own creation, and it is not surprising that he could not admit the idea that his offspring had degenerated beyond recall.” Ibid., p. 214 “The dispute . . . was psychological rather than one of theory: to recognize that Russia had created a new form of class society and exploitation would have meant admitting that Trotsky’s life-work had been in vain, and that he himself had helped to bring about the exact opposite of what he intended.” Ibid., p. 215. “Stalinism was the natural and obvious continuation of the system of government established by Lenin and Trotsky. Trotsky refused to recognize this fact. . . . This desperate self-delusion if is psychologically explicable.” Ibid., p. 219. This sort of psychologizing critique is not new. It was confronted directly by Trotsky in his lifetime, for example in the case of the arguments made against him by Bruno Rizzi. See Leon Trotsky, \textit{In Defense of Marxism}, p. 68.

80. Here the lack of historical proportion noted by MacIntyre assumes a more specific form. One hesitates to disturb Hegel in order to explain Kolakowski’s own psychological condition. Nonetheless, Hegel’s brilliant explanation of a certain type of critic of great men is worth quoting here: “It is in the light of those common elements . . . that these historical men are to be regarded. They are \textit{great} men, because they willed and accomplished something great; not a mere fancy, a mere intention, but that which met the case and fell in with the needs of the age. This mode of considering them
also excludes the so-called ‘psychological’ view, which . . . contrives so to refer all actions to the heart . . . as that their authors appear to have done everything under the impulse of some passion, mean or grand—some morbid craving—and on account of these passions and cravings to have been not moral men. Alexander of Macedon partly subdued Greece, and then Asia; therefore he was possessed by a morbid craving for conquest. He is alleged to have acted from a craving for fame, for conquest; and the proof that these were the impelling motives is that he did that which resulted in fame. What pedagogue has not demonstrated of Alexander the Great—of Julius Caesar—that they were instigated by such passions, and were consequently immoral men—whence the conclusion immediately follows that he, the pedagogue, is a better man than they, because he has not such passions; a proof of which lies in the fact that he does not conquer Asia—vanquish Darius and Porus—but while he enjoys life himself lets others enjoy it too. These psychologists are particularly fond of contemplating those peculiarities of great historical figures which appertain to them as private persons. Man must eat and drink; he sustains relations to friends and acquaintances; he has passing impulses and ebullitions of temper. ‘No man is a hero to his valet-de-chambre,’ is a well-known proverb; I have added . . . ‘but not because the former is no hero, but because the latter is a valet.’ He takes off the hero’s boots, assists him to bed, knows that he prefers champagne, etc. Historical personages waited upon in historical literature by such psychological valets, come poorly off; they are brought down by these their attendants to a level with—or rather a few degrees below the level of—the morality of such exquisite discerners of spirits.”


82. Ibid., pp. 32, 84, 77. Emphases mine.

83. Ibid., p. 426.

84. Ibid., p. 198.

85. Ibid., p. 198.

86. It should be noted that, to his credit, Volkogonov recognizes Trotsky’s role in the Russian revolution and defends his exposure of Stalinist falsification on this score. Ibid., pp. 82–83, 90, 193. By the late 1980s, this concession would not be particularly noteworthy had Volkogonov’s intervention not occurred in the Soviet context, where the Trotsky question remained taboo and continued to be muddled by all sorts of fantastic falsifications. Volkogonov, however, carefully confines this part of his argument to Trotsky’s direct involvement in the immediate events, without considering the possibility that if indeed Stalin had falsified this, he could have falsified the revolution itself, in a broader sense. In other words, Volkogonov steers clear from
the possibility that Stalinism overturned the legacy and conquests of October, and that Trotsky might have represented a political alternative to it.

88. Ibid., p. 30.
89. Ibid., p. 32.
90. Ibid., p. 37.
91. Ibid., p. 35.
92. Ibid., p. 36.
93. For example, “Since Trotsky was more a brilliant theoretical journalist than a philosopher, it would not be fair to the man and his mind to present Trotsky’s concept of Stalinism as if it were a fixed, integrated whole.” “Trotsky’s discussion of this category is either very subtle or not very consistent . . . There probably is a contradiction here, but . . . one should not be too hard on Trotsky on this account.” Ibid., pp. 31, 33.
94. Ibid., pp. 35–39.
96. McNeal, “Trotskyist Interpretations of Stalinism,” p. 33. For a discussion of the controversy of socialism in one country as pivotal to the strategic differences between Stalinism and the opposition, see chapter three of this work
97. Ibid., p. 49.
98. “His basic argument was simply that the economic base in the USSR, a planned economy and nationalized means of production, must mean that the country was a workers’ state.” Ibid., pp. 36–37.
99. This is true of the Russian revolutionary experience, of which Trotsky emphasized not merely its economic outcomes but also the conscious and living quality of it. But it is also true of Trotsky’s appraisal of other states, when the “objective” qualities characteristic of a workers’ state were brought about by counter-productive “subjective” means, as in the case of the Soviet occupation of Poland: “The primary political criterion for us is not the transformation of property relations in this or another area, however important these may be in themselves, but rather the change in the consciousness and organization of the world proletariat, the raising of their capacity for defending former conquests and accomplishing new ones. From this one, and the only decisive standpoint, the politics of Moscow, taken as a whole, completely retains its reactionary character and remains the chief obstacle on the road to world revolution. Our general appraisal of the Kremlin and the Comintern does not, however, alter the particular fact that the stratification of property in the occupied territories is in itself a progressive measure.” Trotsky, In Defense of Marxism, pp. 61–62.
100. “It is simply a cry of anguish from a man who deeply believed in human progress, most particularly in the progressive meaning of his life as a revolutionary, and could not come to terms with the cruel irony that confronted
him in Stalin’s Russia and the Comintern. Although he once denied any ‘subjectivity and sentimentalism’ in facing the possibility of rejecting his own October Revolution, even maintaining that ‘old Freud’ would agree with him on this, Trotsky would have been more than human if he had not felt anguish, rage, and frustration concerning Stalinism.” McNeal, “Trotskyist Interpretations of Stalinism,” p. 30. “It is . . . psychologically understandable . . . that Trotsky in his last months engaged in a passionate defense of the dialectic as the key to any revolutionary thought. Without it the critic of the existing order is doomed to pessimism” Ibid., p. 30; “Much as Trotsky struggled to reject the idea that Stalinism and the workers’ state were mutually exclusive, he understood the force of this argument all too well and most particularly understood its depressing implications for Marxist optimism about the long-term prospects for mankind . . . one senses that Trotsky was nearly ready to agree with his adversaries on the ‘left.’” That he did not do seems partly attributable to his awareness of the pessimistic conclusions to which such thinking led” Ibid., p. 38; “This was Trotsky’s least prophetic insight but a very natural, human response to the dismal situation that he faced in his last years.” Ibid., p. 39.

101. Ibid., p. 52.
102. Ibid., p. 36.
103. Ibid., pp. 37; 35–36.
104. Ibid., p. 51.
106. For Trotsky’s own indictment of this tendency, see Their Morals and Ours (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973). Incidentally, Beilharz does discuss this essay, quickly reducing it to an expression Jacobinism: “The later Trotsky regards morality in general as premarxist and therefore obsolete. It is a straightforward matter: there are their morals, and ours . . .” Ibid., p. 21. One can disagree with Trotsky’s arguments, but this would require attaining a threshold of argumentative decency Beilharz falls short of here. For a more thoughtful critique of Trotsky’s argument see Dewey’s response to it in the same book.
108. For example, Trotsky is depicted as being moved by “a quasi-religious faith in the inevitability of socialism” Beilharz, p. 23; “his arguments are typically presented in formal style: if A, B, then C. A is asserted and beyond discussion; it usually has its source in evolutionist common sense,” p. 24; “Political and moral problems are simply brushed aside by reference to the alleged class origins of the opponent,” p. 24; “Trotsky’s class analysis remains prescriptive or instinctive, working at the level of ‘good classes’ and ‘bad classes.’ Robespierre would have approved,” p. 31; “Trotsky’s . . . self-willed commitment to such a philosophy of history is, strictly speaking, prerational—and
Trotzky did see Marxism as a matter of faith,” p. 45; “Trotzky lacks the critical distance from the events of October to write a more accurate history,” p. 45; “Trotzky’s need for consolation manifests itself on the level of faith,” p. 52; “Trotzky’s explanation of Stalinism and of history remains hopelessly enigmatic,” p. 52; “Trotzky’s Marxism is built on the premises of automaticity and historical guarantees,” p. 59; “Trotzky’s fetish of planning should come as no surprise when his rationalism, his enthusiasm for efficiency and technocracy are remembered,” p. 66. This list provides a rough measure of the level at which the dismissive literature represented by Beilharz tends to operate. One could point out as an example, even at this introductory stage, that Trotzky’s approach to the problem of the transition to socialism in Russia as crystallized in his concept of uneven and combined development had nothing to do with “evolutionist common sense.” One could refer the reader to any of the collections of Trotzky’s writings on France, Germany, Spain, or England, to rapidly verify how Trotzky delved deeply and concretely into “political problems,” in multifarious contexts, without recourse to formulaic shortcuts such as “good and bad classes.” But to provide a point-by-point refutation of these charges would be a debasing exercise promising only diminishing returns.

110. Ibid., pp. 15–16.
111. While Beilharz demonstrates only a passing familiarity with this academic tradition, this is not to say that he necessarily vulgarizes it. Indeed in most cases postmodernism seems to stand on a foundation of commonplaces semi-consciously derived from the American legacy of the New Left and identity politics (pluralism, difference, contingency, hostility to political strategy, form, and organization) without bothering to defend or justify them politically. For a perceptive elaboration of this argument, see John Sanbonmatsu, The Postmodern Prince: Critical Theory, Left Strategy, and the Making of a New Political Subject (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004).

112. “As Barthes explains, what allows the reader to consume myth innocently is that s/he does not see it as a semiological system but an inductive one: the language of myth in this specific sense naturalizes its object, presents a system of values as a system of facts. In this specific sense Trotzky’s historiography functions as what Barthes calls a mythology: it is an inclusive discourse, with a necessitarian plot.” Beilharz, p. 48.
113. Ibid., p. 46.
114. A similar feat of Lilliputianism is accomplished by Joel Carmichael, who flippantly accuses Trotzky of political ineptitude and passivity (induced, it turns out, by a shy personality and a sort of Jewish inferiority complex), and of holding on to the presumably mistaken “conviction . . . that only Ideas really count”—a conviction that in Trotzky’s case led to their “deification.”
Joel Carmichael, “Trotsky’s Agony (I),” *Encounter* 38, no. 5 (May 1972), p. 37. Joel Carmichael, “Trotsky’s Agony (II),” *Encounter* 38, no. 6 (June 1972), p. 30. This was written by a scholar whose professional success was due mainly to his work on Christianity and Judaism (rather than the few and unfortunate forays in the study of the Soviet experience), and who seeks to explain Trotsky’s alleged political passivity with an utterly bizarre argument about his failure to mention the Bar Mitzvah studies of his youth in his autobiography. Carmichael’s stupidity becomes nearly disarming when he reveals his main discovery: “what . . . must be regarded as the major fact of Trotsky’s life” is that “he spent most of it surrounded by books and living by his pen” (“Trotsky’s Agony (I),” p. 39).

115. Beilharz, pp. 69, 79.  
116. Ibid., p. 80.  
117. Ibid., p. 60.  
118. Ibid., pp. 63–64.  
119. Ibid., p. 39.  
120. Ibid., pp. 15, 39.  
121. “This kind of [teleological] argument is more than receptive to Jacobin outcomes, in politics and historiography alike . . . this kind of Second International discourse, with its language of generation/degeneration, necessity and nomos, itself invites Jacobin intervention, itself begs for the Bolshevik scalpel which lances the abscess that Plekhanov and Kautsky merely watched and monitored.” Ibid., p. 40.  
122. Ibid., p. 10.  
123. Ibid., pp. 70–71.  
124. Ibid., p. 65.  
125. “Trotsky is unable to perceive the USSR as a new society whose present form is permanent”; “Trotsky’s *either* capitalist restoration or socialist revival . . . avoids the prospects of the regime’s permanence”; “the acceptance of the Soviet regime as permanent would jeopardise his view of history and call into question the exclusive categories of capitalism and socialism” (Beilharz, pp. 61, 63, 65).  
127. Knei-Paz, pp. xii-xiii.  
128. Ibid., p. viii.  
129. Knei-Paz’s complaint against Deutscher’s work as “lacking in any real analysis since it concentrates on merely summarizing . . . these writings” is therefore particularly difficult to digest, and can only invite an extremely unfavorable comparison. Deutscher’s work, regardless of some problematic positions I will discuss below, approaches the question with literary flair and a keen sense of what is at stake. Alasdair MacIntyre also remarked about the pedantic character of Knei-Paz’s book in his review. See *American Historical Review* 84, no. 1 (Feb. 1979), pp. 113–114.
Notes to Chapter Four


131. Ibid., pp. 134, 181. I have already had the opportunity to comment on these charges in this chapter.

132. “No treatment of Trotsky’s thought exists which is at once comprehensive and free of partisanship of one kind or another.” Knei-Paz, p. x.


134. For one of Trotsky’s most important statements on this matter, see his preface to the *History of the Russian Revolution*. Trotsky discusses his attempt to attain objectivity not only as a Marxist and political agent, but also as one of the protagonists of the story he sought to narrate. Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2001), pp. 19–22.

135. For a persuasive argument along these lines against Thatcher’s biography, as well as Geoffrey Swain’s more recent *Trotsky* (New York: Longman, 2006), see David North, “Leon Trotsky and the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification,” http://www.wsws.org/articles/2007/may2007/lec1-m09.shtml.


138. Ibid., p. 262.

139. This legend is similar to the one circulated for some time by the Catholic Church about Antonio Gramsci’s acceptance of Christianity in his deathbed. I will discuss it in chapter five.

140. Timpanaro’s critique was in a way a peculiar confirmation of the distortions typical of Western Marxism. Timpanaro, who attacked the “subjectivism” endemic to Western Marxism as typical of the “revolutionary with a degree of Arts” was in fact himself by training and expertise a philologist. Sebastiano Timpanaro, *On Materialism* (London: Verso, 1975), p. 9.

141. Ibid., p. 9.

142. Ibid., pp. 22, 33, 244. It should be noted, moreover, that neither the PSIUP nor the PDUP were in any sense “Trotskyist” parties.

143. Ibid., pp. 18–20.

144. On this MacIntyre is correct, though he wrongly paints the late Trotsky as an incipient pessimist. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 262.

145. Howe, pp. 193, viii.

146. “Trotsky’s ideas are inseparable from his career as Marxist revolutionary; they cannot, or should not, be considered in isolation, as a mere system; they take on vibrancy only when set into their context of striving, debate, combat.” Howe, p. viii.

147. Ibid., pp. 136, 187.

148. Howe adopted one of the strategic perspectives on the Soviet Union and Stalinism rival to Trotsky’s—the notion of the Soviet Union as a “bureaucratic
collectivist” society. Ibid., pp. viii, 128. Against Trotsky’s, this perspective understood the USSR as a fundamentally stable society rather than an inherently unstable and transitional one, the bureaucracy as a new ruling class, not a caste, and the need for a new social, not merely political revolution. Ibid., pp. 128, 190. As in Beilharz’s case, though from a different standpoint, Howe’s confidence in the fundamental stability of the Soviet Union, as well as the impossibility of a restoration of capitalism engineered by the same “ruling class” was not to stand the test of history. “The point of the criticism . . . is . . . to call into question the rightness of a comprehensive historical and political approach. And the evidence seems strongly to indicate that the whole outlook of revolutionary Marxism-Leninism as Trotsky understood it broke down before the realities of mid-twentieth-century political life.” Ibid., pp. 190–191.

149. Ibid., pp. 120–122; 130; 134–135; 162.
150. Ibid., p. 192.
151. There are numerous variations on this theme. One of the most interesting is the case of Bertram Wolfe, which combines an initial fierce hostility to Trotsky from the standpoint of American Stalinism—Wolfe among others was responsible for the expulsions of the earliest supporters of Trotsky from the ranks of the Communist Party in the United States—with a latter-day cold war anti-communism, in which Wolfe came to play the role of the ex-insider expert. Nonetheless, Wolfe’s important book *Three Who Made a Revolution* exposes Stalin’s alleged credentials as an early leader in the construction of Russian Social-Democracy, borrowing from and following closely Trotsky’s analysis of this question. On a different note, it should also be noted that the phenomenon of the Trotskyist “Neo-Con” is today recognized by various quarters as some profound insight into the political psychology of extremism, and a subterranean and neglected current in the motivations of the Bush administration. Generally the level of historical awareness and political sense in these arguments is abysmal. For a succinct critique, see Bill Vann, “The Historical Roots of Neoconservatism: A Reply to a Slanderous Attack on Trotskyism,” http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/may2003/shac-m23.shtml.

152. For an example of a critique of Deutscher as an “apologist” for Trotsky, see Carmichael, “Trotsky’s Agony (II),” pp. 32–35.
153. “Such . . . was the strange dialectics of Stalin’s victory that it seemed to turn that victory into Trotsky’s posthumous triumph. It was as if Stalin himself had crowned all his toils and labours, all his controversies and purges, by an unexpected vindication of his dead opponent.” See Deutscher, *Stalin* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), p. 552. “As in the nineteen-twenties so in the nineteen-thirties, [Trotsky] considered the bureaucracy . . . the potential agent of a capitalist restoration . . . This view appears altogether erroneous in retrospect. Far from laying its hands on and appropriating the means of production, the
Soviet bureaucracy was, in the coming decades, to remain the guardian of public ownership.” See Deutscher The Prophet Outcast, p. 248. “In our time . . . its ideas [Trotsky's The Revolution Betrayed] are already in the air in the U.S.S.R., where Trotsky’s writings are still banned. The Soviet Jouidains who nowadays unknowingly speak his prose are legion: they are to be found in universities, factories, literary clubs, Komosol cells, and even in the ruling circles.” Ibid., p. 262. “Stalin’s victory over Trotsky concealed a heavy element of defeat while Trotsky’s defeat was pregnant with victory.” Ibid., p. 418.


155. The clearest articulation of Deutscher’s position on the objective inevitability, first of revolutionary exhaustion, then of reaction is found in his Stalin, pp. 173–176, which lays out a fundamental trajectory characteristic of all revolutions. Trotsky’s version of this argument is not to posit a mechanical, iron rule of history, by which an active revolution from below will invariably give in to a conservative regime, a passive revolution from above. Instead he recognized that the masses’ physiological exhaustion after a revolutionary fibrillation was one factor that tended to create a less favorable terrain of political struggle—but one factor among many. Alasdair MacIntyre rightly emphasized this difference between Deutscher and Trotsky on this score. See MacIntyre, Against the Self-Images of the Age, pp. 52–59; MacIntyre, “Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?” in Alan Ryan (ed.), The Philosophy of Social Explanation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 182–183.

156. In one of the many discussion and debates on the nature of the Soviet state and the effects of its international policies, James Cannon, one of the founders of American Trotskyism explained, “. . . about the Soviet Union, that nationalization plus the foreign trade, is not the criterion of a workers state. That is what remains of [a] workers state created by the Russian Revolution. That is why the Soviet state is called ‘degenerate.’ There is a tremendous difference whether a state has nationalized property relations as a result of a proletarian revolution, or whether there are certain progressive moves toward nationalization.” Cited in David North, The Heritage We Defend (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1988), pp. 165–166.


158. “The chief agents of revolution were not the workers of the countries concerned, and their parties, but the Red Army. Success and failure depended not on the balance of social forces within any nation, but mainly on the international balance of power, on diplomatic pacts, alliances, and military
campaigns. The struggle and co-operation of the great powers superimposed themselves upon class struggle, changing and distorting it. All criteria by which Marxism were wont to judge a nation’s ‘maturity’ or ‘immaturity’ for revolution went by the board” Ibid., pp. 419–420.

159. Isaac Deutscher, *Marxism, Wars, and Revolutions* (London: Verso, 1984), pp. 57–58. Although Deutscher wrote this passage to describe the best-case scenario in the sad evolution of the ex-communist—and while he certainly never became one of them—the peculiarity of his position makes this characterization applicable to the later part of his own life, when he found himself giving various academic lectures as a political free agent.

160. For a discussion of the multifarious aspects of Stalinism, see chapter three above.

161. “...[A]s de-Stalinization was an inescapable necessity, Stalin’s acolytes and accomplices had to tackle the job; and they could not tackle it otherwise than half-heartedly, with trembling hands and minds, never forgetting their own share in Stalin’s crimes, and for ever anxious to bring to a halt the shocking disclosures and the reforms they themselves had had to institute. Of all the ghosts of the past none dogged them as mockingly and menacingly as the ghost of Trotsky, their arch-enemy, to whom each of their disclosures and reforms was an unwitting tribute. Nothing indeed troubled Khrushchev more than the fear that young men, not burdened by responsibility for the horrors of the Stalin era, might become impatient with his evasions and quibblings and proceed to an open vindication of Trotsky. The open vindication is bound to come in any case, though not perhaps before Stalin’s ageing epigones have left the stage. When it does come, it will be more than a long-overdue act of justice towards the memory of a great man. By this act the workers’ state will announce that it has at least reached maturity, broken its bureaucratic shackles, and re-embraced the classical Marxism that had been banished with Trotsky.” Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast*, p. 423. One should notice not just how history betrayed Deutscher’s expectations, but also how in this view Trotsky is reduced to a mere measuring instrument to verify the completion of a political process that is otherwise quite independent from the agency of the movement he created.

162. Deutscher, “Marxism and Primitive Magic,” p. 116. Deutscher makes this remark in order to justify his analysis of Stalinism as the recrudescence of backward cultural and religious features of Russia—an analysis that resembles the standard fare of Sovietology on the “Asiatic” and “oriental” theme.

163. In his expectations for the revitalization of the Soviet Union from within and the self-reform of the bureaucracy, Deutscher was certainly not alone. E.H. Carr’s multi-volume series on the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period was inspired by a similar position on the inevitability, and ultimately progressive character of Stalinism. There is also another kind of literature on the Soviet Union entrenched on the same positions. Moshe Lewin’s and
later Stephen Cohen’s work flowed from a similar perspective, based on the prospect of Stalinist self-reform, but was far more congruently developed under the banner of Bukharin, not Trotsky.


165. Ibid., p. 254.

166. For an account of Deutscher’s personal role in this, see The Prophet Outcast, p. 458, fn. 88. For Deutscher’s recurring fulminations against the futility of the Fourth International and of Trotskyism as a movement, see Ibid., pp. 47, 150, 172, 231, 342–344, 386.

167. For Deutscher’s assessment of China in these terms, see The Prophet Outcast, pp. 421–422.

168. For example, “Before he was murdered by Stalin’s assassin, Trotsky said that, of all his contributions to the working-class movement, it was his activity after 1933, in other words, the founding of the Fourth International, which he considered most important, even more important than his leadership of the October uprising or his formulation of the theory of permanent revolution . . . This is the statement of Trotsky which today arouses the most vociferous objection, the greatest lack of understanding. I am convinced, however, that in time to come this statement of Trotsky’s will be confirmed by history.” Ernest Mandel, Trotsky as Alternative, p. 26.

169. Ibid., p. 166.

170. North, The Heritage We Defend, p. 188.

171. This is not the “entry-ism” that was from the beginning part of the Trotskyist arsenal as a limited, tactical maneuver. The outlook was strategic, if not permanent, leading to the humiliating and ineffective subordination to Stalinism as the main engine of socialism. For a brief sketch of this process in the Italian context, see Emanuele Saccarelli, “Empire, Rifondazione Comunista, and the Politics of Spontaneity,” New Political Science 26, no. 4 (December 2004), pp. 569–591. See also Peter Schwartz, “Livio Maitan, 1923–2004: A Critical Assessment,” http://www.wsws.org/articles/testdir/nov2004/mai1–04n.shtml.

172. See North, The Heritage We Defend, pp. 301, 307; Alex Callinicos, Trotskyism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 52. This tendency characterized other important figures whose outlook had been significantly shaped by Deutscher. Tariq Ali, for example, hailed Gorbachev as the leader who would finally shake off the Stalinist baggage of the Soviet leadership and set it on a genuinely Marxist course. Ali even dedicated a book to Boris Yeltsin for the same reasons.


174. “Revolution did spread, but to the backward regions of Asia and the Balkans. Moreover, these revolutions were uniformly organized and led by local Communist Parties professing loyalty to Stalin—Chinese, Vietnamese,
Yugoslav, Albanian—and modeled in their internal structures on the CPSU. Far from being passively propelled by the masses in the countries, these parties actively mobilized and vertically commanded the masses in their assault on power. The states they created were to be manifestly cognate (not identical: affinal) with the USSR, in their basic political system. Stalinism, in other words, proved to be not just an apparatus, but a *movement*—one capable not only of keeping power in a backward environment dominated by scarcity (USSR), but of actually winning power in environments that were yet more backward and destitute (China, Vietnam)—of expropriating the bourgeoisie and starting the slow work of socialist construction, even against the will of Stalin himself. Therewith, one of the equations in Trotsky’s interpretation undoubtedly fell. Stalinism as a broad phenomenon, that is, a workers’ state ruled by an authoritarian bureaucratic stratum, did not merely represent a *degeneration* from a prior state of (relative) class grace: it could also be a spontaneous *generation* produced by revolutionary class forces in very backward societies, without any tradition of either bourgeois or proletarian democracy.” Perry Anderson, “Trotsky’s Interpretation of Stalinism,” in Ali (ed.), *The Stalinist Legacy*, p. 127.

175. Anderson’s critique of Trotsky mirrors Deutscher’s insistence on the lingering vitality and progressive character of international Stalinism: “The movement behind the Comintern was anything but a ‘corpse.’ All that Stalin did to wreck it morally could not kill it. At the very time he disbanded the Comintern its western European parties were gaining fresh strength from their resistance to the Nazi occupation; and it was still under Stalinist banners, though in implicit conflict with Stalin, that the Yugoslav and the Chinese revolutions were to achieve their victories.” And again on the mistaken one-sidedness of Trotsky’s assessment of the effect of Stalinism outside of the USSR, “Again and again he asserted that, while in the Soviet Union Stalinism continued to play a dual role, at once progressive and retrograde, it exercised internationally only a counter-revolutionary influence. Here his grasp of reality failed him. Stalinism was to go on acting its dual role internationally as well as nationally: it was to stimulate as well as to obstruct the class struggle outside the Soviet Union.” Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast*, p. 171.

176. “Western Marxism . . . was always magnetically polarized towards official Communism as the only historical incarnation of the international proletariat as a revolutionary class. It never completely accepted Stalinism; yet it never actively combated it either. But whatever nuance of attitude successive thinkers adopted towards it, for all of them there was no other effective reality or milieu of socialist action outside it.” See Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, p. 96. Some of the figures discussed by Anderson, such as Louis Althusser, had of course clear institutional connections to the Stalinist parties. This is also true of other figures not discussed.
by Anderson as a consequence of his specific geographical parameters—in particular British historians such as Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, and E.P. Thompson.

177. Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, p. 100.

178. “The historical scale of Trotsky’s accomplishment is still difficult to realize today.” Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, p. 97. Politically, the principal merit was of course to have opposed the Stalinist degeneration. At the level of theory, Anderson identified four main contributions: the history of the Russian Revolution, the analysis of fascism, the concrete political analysis of several West European countries in the manner of Marx’s *Eighth Brumaire* and *The Civil War in France*, and the analysis of the Soviet Union and Stalinism.


180. Ibid., pp. 103; 100.

181. Ibid., pp. 95–96.

182. Ibid., p. 106.

183. Anderson’s retraction is based on a reconsideration of the question of history and the danger of reducing Marxism to a mere “analysis of the current conjecture.” Given the historical scope of his text and its forceful argument about the need to retrieve a tradition based on a particular history and rooted in certain epochal, not merely “contemporary” traits, this aspect of Anderson’s self-criticism is neither clear nor persuasive. Anderson does, however, raise a valid and important objection to his own text. His generally incisive critique of Western Marxism and corresponding praise of Trotsky’s legacy was based in part on a notion of the unity of political theory and practice that was posited too hastily, without considering its complications. This is an important question in reassessing Trotsky’s legacy, and will be discussed in the conclusion.

184. This diagnosis was not based on its “objective” features understood in a desiccated manner—its nationalized property, or even its planned economy. It was also based, as already discussed, on lingering “subjective” aspects, particularly its profound revolutionary experience.


NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE


5. For example, according to Baruch Knei-Paz, this statement, coming from “one of Trotsky’s most neglected works,” is “the most cogent analysis . . . of the Bolshevik phenomenon.” See Baruch Knei-Paz, *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 193.

6. For example, see Bertram Wolfe, *Three Who Made a Revolution* (New York: Delta Books, 1964), pp. 253, 293–294. Also Knei-Paz, p. 440: “The irony of Trotsky’s failure in the 1930s to derive Stalinism from Bolshevism . . . is that it was precisely this derivation that he himself had anticipated in his condemnation of Lenin in 1903–4.”

7. See Knei-Paz, p. 185, fn. 29.


12. Trotsky’s early opposition to Lenin elicits a comparison with Gramsci. Both Trotsky and Gramsci underwent an initial period of political formation that, particularly on the question of the party, veered in a spontaneist direction. Thus the writings of the early Trotsky being discussed here are sometimes compared with Luxemburg’s critical attitude toward Bolshevism, such as expressed in her pamphlet “Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy.” To be more precise, both Luxemburg (at least before her elaboration of the mass strike) and the early Trotsky agreed in principle with centralism, fighting for a version of it different from that insisted upon by Lenin and Bolshevism. Gramsci’s early period was similarly characterized by a vague spontaneism, but with a more specific orientation toward the factory councils. In this he was no doubt influenced by the important experience of the factory occupations that erupted in Italy on the heels of the Russian revolution. Once again, this orientation tended to underestimate the role the party and the importance of centralism and leadership within it. These early formative periods were used against both Gramsci and Trotsky later, as proof of their insufficient “Leninism” in the factional struggles that involved them against Stalinism.

13. This proposal was made in Lenin’s “testament,” which was suppressed, and only came out in the foreign press thanks to Max Eastman, probably with Trotsky’s collaboration. For an account of this period in Lenin’s political activity, see Moshe Lewin, *Lenin’s Last Struggle* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968).
14. This “Central Control Commission” was designed to rein in the Rabkrin (People’s Commissariat of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspections), which was controlled by Stalin. Although the history of the debates over these changing institutional prerogatives is a complex one, the final result is sufficient to show how difficult it would be to fight bureaucratism by bureaucratic means: the new Central Control Commission was set into place after all, and with extensive powers, but it fell into the hands of a close associate of Stalin. See Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: The Life of Trotsky, 1921–1929* (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 39–40, 73, 86; Lewin, pp. 120–128; Robert Daniels, *The Conscience of the Revolution: Communist Opposition in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 189–192.

15. Alexander Rabinowitch provides a painstakingly detailed verification of this thesis in his book *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*. Rabinowitch demonstrates that during the entire length of the revolutionary crisis Lenin was constantly engaged in a struggle with significant and often majoritarian sections of the Bolshevik party. To cite one of many examples, at the end of September 1917 Lenin tendered his resignation from the Central Committee of the party, while the editorial board of the Petrograd paper was effectively censoring his articles. See Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2004), pp. 193–194.


17. Lenin’s testament identified this contraposition and warned that it could become the axis for a possible split in the party.

18. As already explained, this program had nothing in common with the disastrous forced collectivization implemented by Stalin in the late 1920s.


22. Ibid., p. 45.

23. Ibid., p. 45.

24. “The bureaucratism of the party . . . is not a survival of some preceding regime, a survival in the process of disappearing; on the contrary, it is an essentially new phenomenon, flowing from the new tasks, the new functions, the new difficulties and the new mistakes of the party.” Ibid., p. 24. As Lewin notes, this aspect of Trotsky’s analysis of this problem departed most sharply from Lenin, who instead “tended to see it as an inheritance from the old regime.” Lewin, p. 124. For Trotsky’s account of the new social roots of bureaucratism, see *The New Course*, p. 45.

25. Ibid., p. 15.

27. Ibid. p. 177.
29. Ibid., p. 35.
30. This is a pervasive theme of *The New Course*, and in the later Trotsky’s political work as well. Historically, in spite of several rounds of administrative measures, the *Komsomol* (Communist Youth League) remained for a long time a source of trouble for Stalinism.
31. The principle of election and immediate recall of government officials had been foundational to the Bolshevik propaganda and understanding of a post-revolutionary society. This principle was implemented in practice, for example, in military units—the most unlikely of places for democratic experimentation. The grim realities of the Civil War, however, had pushed the Bolsheviks to retreat to a system of appointments. In 1923 Trotsky was opposing its entrenchment as a permanent system. See *The New Course*. p. 14. See also Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed*, pp. 90–91.
33. Trotsky noted with alarm that the sociological makeup of the Bolshevik party by 1923 had changed so that only one member in every six was of proletarian origin. *The New Course*, p. 43. This was a serious and legitimate concern, but not when interpreted in a mere quantitative sense. This would be proven in 1924, when the Stalinist leadership outflanked Trotsky on this front, orchestrating a sudden and massive infusion of 200,000 people into the party, many of whom were workers. This mere quantitative boost, called the “Lenin Levy” on the occasion of his passing, did not improve the fundamental conditions because it was a calculated bureaucratic maneuver that merely inserted these workers into the same bureaucratic conditions and regime. For Trotsky’s later reflections on the significance of the Lenin Levy, see Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (Detroit: Labor Books, 1991), p. 84.
34. This connection would remain a foundational element of Trotsky’s critique of Stalinism. At the beginning of 1935, for example, he insisted that the planned economy should be judged not simply on its technical economic successes, but on whether it operated and elicited an “active response on the part of the interested groups in the populace,” noting that in the case of the first Five Year Plan orchestrated under Stalinism, “the political self-action on the part of the population has been stifled.” See *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1935–36* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2004), pp. 230–231. Deutscher tended to systematically overlook this aspect of Trotsky’s critique. He claimed that Trotsky’s position here was fundamentally flawed because it rested on two incompatible demands, calling for both workers’ democracy
and industrialization and planning. Deutscher’s assessment flows from his perspective of the inevitability of Stalinism and the ultimately historically justified character of the industrialization and forced collectivization engineered by it, beginning in the late 1920s. Thus Deutscher saw the available strategic prospects consisting of either the revitalization of the workers’ democracy (a demand that from Deutscher’s standpoint appears as fundamentally unrealistic) or industrialization from above and by force (Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed*, pp. 108–109). For a more perceptive discussion of this question, see Howe, pp. 118–121.

35. “And now the bureaucrats are ready formally to ‘take note’ of the ‘new course,’ that is, *to nullify it bureaucratically.*” Leon Trotsky, *New Course*, p. 94. Emphasis in the original.

36. Ibid., p. 93.

37. “[E]fforts are being made to demonstrate that in order to give life to the party, it is necessary to begin by raising the level of its members, after which everything else, that is, workers’ democracy, will come of its own accord. It is incontestable that we must raise the ideological level of our party in order to enable it to accomplish the gigantic tasks devolving upon it. But precisely because of this, such a purely *pedagogical* . . . way of putting the question is insufficient and . . . erroneous . . . The party cannot raise its level except by accomplishing its essential tasks, by the collective leadership that displays the initiative of the working class and the proletarian state. The question must be approached not from the *pedagogical*, but from the *political* point of view. The application of workers’ democracy cannot be made dependent upon the degree of ‘preparation’ of the party members for this democracy. A party is a party. We can make stringent demands upon those who want to enter and stay in it; but once they are members, they participate most actively . . . Bureaucratism kills initiative and thus prevents the elevation of the general level of the party.” Ibid., p. 91.

38. Under Lenin, however, the ban did not function to suppress debate and criticism of official policy, or the possibility of democratically revising such policy at each congress. For an explanation of the ways in which the spirit and concrete application of the ban changed substantially after Lenin’s death, see Medvedev, pp. 385–388.


40. Ibid., p. 30.

41. Ibid., p. 29.

42. Trotsky discussed sharp intraparty conflicts over the seizure of power in 1917, the Brest-Litovsk treaty (1918), the question of military organization (1919), and the trade union question (1920–21). Ibid., pp. 30–33. It is significant that in many of these instances Trotsky had found himself in the defeated minority and had been able to continue to function as party leader nevertheless.
43. Ibid., p. 13.
44. Ibid., p. 16.
45. Ibid., p. 25. It should be clear that Trotsky’s perspective concerning the revitalization of the masses was not of the semi-syndicalist sort that were in circulation at the time—for example, those expressed by the Workers’ Opposition. The idea was to restore the proper dialectic between the masses and the party, not to dispose of the latter. On this score, Trotsky’s critique bears a great resemblance to the more cryptic one developed by Gramsci in the Notebooks, which was discussed in chapter three above. The general parameters of the two critiques are the same. One finds in both an insistence on the maximum expansion of democratic avenues within the context of the single-party regime, and on the correct calibration of the elements of democracy and centralism. One also finds an acknowledgement of the danger of alien class forces making their influence felt in the state and in the party, but at the same time of the futility of dealing with this danger through bureaucratic prohibitions and the self-imposed suppression of party life. This similarity is one not just content, but form as well. Similar ideas are expressed through similar images. Trotsky’s warning against the allure of the pervasive and artificial “calm” within the party is similar to Gramsci’s discussion of the superficially appealing “silence,” and of the necessity for the unpleasant, but vital cacophony of intraparty life. See Trotsky, The New Course, pp. 29, 38, 96. Trotsky also discusses the role of youth in the party as more than a mere “barometer,” something that “does not create the weather.” This is similar to Gramsci’s critique of the futility of eliminating intraparty differences by “smashing the barometer.” Trotsky, The New Course, pp. 23–24. Behind the similarities in form and content lies in all probability a direct influence. It was of course Gramsci who, writing a decade later and already familiar with the terms of this critique, echoed Trotsky, and not the other way around.

47. Ibid., p. 51.
48. Ibid., p. 54.
49. “Leninism consists in being courageously free from conservative retrospection, from being bound by precedent, purely formal references and quotations.” Trotsky, The New Course, p. 53. In this respect Trotsky’s position was consistent with his understanding of Marxism itself as “a method of analysis—not . . . of texts, but . . . of social relations,” and with his inclination to adapt it, sometimes boldly, in the face of changes in the real movement of history, as discussed in the previous chapter with respect to the concept of uneven and combined development. Trotsky’s position also reflected his own travailed and far from automatic route to “Leninism,” a matter he would discuss in detail in his 1929 autobiography. See also Ibid., p. 57.
50. Ibid., p. 56. “Without a continuous lineage, and consequently, without a tradition, there cannot be stable progress.” Ibid., p. 103.
51. The fact that Lenin’s image is instead typically that of the inflexible dogmatist is no doubt linked to the long and corrosive history of this artificial “Leninism.” Some studies of Lenin’s thought and political life manage to overcome this stereotype, even while remaining politically hostile. Wolfe’s *Three Who Made a Revolution*, for example, is remarkably sensitive to the seeming paradox of Lenin’s combination of maximum flexibility of political maneuver and open-mindedness in the face of changing events with his utterly inflexible commitment to socialist principles and to a revolutionary perspective.

52. Trotsky, *The New Course*, pp. 103–104. Also, “to dissolve every practical question and the differences of opinion flowing from it in the ‘tradition’ of the party, transformed into an abstraction, means in most cases to renounce what is most important in this tradition itself: the posing and solving of every problem in its integral reality.” Ibid., p. 68.

53. “Lenin cannot be chopped up into quotations suited for every possible case, because for Lenin the formula never stands higher than the reality . . . It would not be hard to find in Lenin dozens and hundreds of passages which, formally speaking, seem to be contradictory. But what must be seen is not the formal relationship of one passage to another, but the real relationship of each of them to the concrete reality in which the formula was introduced as a lever.” Ibid., p. 55.

54. Ibid., p. 52.

55. Ibid., p. 54. One of the many examples of this was in the aftermath of the “July Days” of the revolution, when Lenin had the occasion to write the following: “all too often in the past when history has made a sharp turn, even progressive parties have been unable to adapt quickly to new situations and have repeated slogans that were valid before but had now lost all meaning.” Cited in Rabinowitch, p. 61.

56. Reflecting on this tendency later Trotsky criticized the way in which the Bolshevik tradition as the capacity to execute an abrupt turn, or “maneuver,” had turned into the sordid maneuvers of bureaucratic opportunism: “the opportunism of the recent period, zigzagging ever more deeply to the right, has advanced primarily under the banner of maneuver strategy . . . The apparatus continually maneuvered with the party. Zinoviev and Kamenev are now maneuvering with the apparatus. A whole corps of specialists in maneuvers for bureaucratic requirement arose which consists predominantly of people who never were revolutionary fighters, and who now bow all the more ardently before the revolution after it has already conquered power . . . While broods of young academicians in maneuvers have been brought up who approach Bolshevik flexibility mainly by the elasticity of their own spines . . . In the nature of things, of course, they are not strategists but only bureaucratic combinationists of all statures, save the great.” Leon Trotsky, *The Third International after Lenin* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1996), pp. 149–150.
57. This is even less decisive once one considers the events from the standpoint of a broader historical long perspective. As will be discussed later, Trotsky managed not to get lost in the tactical details, and to understand the events and the significance of his opposition from a broader perspective.


59. Trotsky understood that official bureaucratism was not simply a distortion at the top, but also drew strength from the mood of exhaustion and conservatism that gripped certain layers of the Soviet masses. His reflections on this matter from a slightly later period are found in “Theses on Revolution and Counterrevolution,” in Isaac Deutscher (ed.), The Age of Permanent Revolution: A Trotsky Anthology (New York: Dell Publishing, 1973), pp. 141–145.


62. Deutscher, The Prophet Unarmed, p. 113. For a succinct account of the political struggles and intrigue sparked by the document, see Medvedev, pp. 24–29.

63. Deutscher, The Prophet Unarmed, p. 114. See also Daniels, The Conscience of the Revolution, pp. 254. At this stage this measure was not taken because of Stalin’s opposition to it, which was in all likelihood of a tactical character.

64. Deutscher, The Prophet Unarmed, p. 114. The character of the earlier struggles among factions and dissenters had been very different. This is true, for example, of the treatment of the Workers’ Opposition during Lenin’s time. For a useful discussion of this question, see Medvedev, pp. 32–34.

65. Indeed some of the intraparty struggle of the previous years, particularly in the case of Brest-Litovsk, had produced rhetoric that was far more volatile and aggressive than that used by Trotsky in this instance.


70. During the Civil War there had already been a significant conflict between Stalin and Trotsky over military strategy as well as doctrine.

71. For information on the strength of the Left Opposition in the military circles, see Vladimir Rogovin, 1937: Stalin’s Year of Terror (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 1998), pp. 400–401.

73. For a similar discussion of this question, see Howe, pp. 108–109. Trotsky himself returned to this question later, in “How did Stalin Defeat the Opposition?” in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1935–36)*, pp. 198–208.


75. Trotsky’s intervention was a new preface to his 1917 writings, later published as *Lessons of October*. It sparked another massive controversy that became known as the “literary debate.”

76. See Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005). In the 1930s Trotsky would also subject to stinging criticism the official doctrine and ensuing artistic production of “socialist realism,” which marked a further degeneration of Stalinism in this field.


78. This was done in a series of articles collected in the volume *Problems of Everyday Life: Creating the Foundations for a New Society in Revolutionary Russia* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1994).


80. Ibid., pp. 175–178.

81. *The Platform of the Joint Opposition* (London: New Park Publications, 1973). The institutional arena of this challenge was the Fifteenth Party Congress and the debates and conferences held in preparation for it. The congress opened on December 2 1926, after being delayed by Stalin for tactical reasons so he could completely rout the opposition and remove its leaders from positions of power.


83. Ibid., pp. 235–236.


85. Stephen Cohen, whose work is guided by the notion that Bukharin was distinguished by his moderation and represented a historical alternative to Stalinism rather than a constitutive component of it, refers to these events as “a sequence of tragic-comic incidents.” *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, p. 264. In a similar spirit, and for similar reasons, see Medvedev, pp. 59–61.

86. Zinoviev infamously cited the need of having the “courage to surrender.” Cited in the introduction to *Platform of the Joint Opposition*, p. x. A few of Trotsky’s followers, most notably Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko and Yuri Piatakov, also capitulated at this stage. As a rule, this capitulation marked a long and tragic sequence of further prostration, ending in most cases, including that of Zinoviev, Kamenev, Antonov-Ovseenko, and Piatakov, with execution after the Moscow trials.

87. “[T]here exist, in our society . . . forces hostile to our cause—the kulak, the Nepman, the bureaucrat—availing themselves of our backwardness and our
political mistakes . . . these forces are so strong that they can push our governmental and economic machine in the wrong direction, and ultimately even attempt . . . to seize the wheel of the machine.” Ibid., p. 2.

88. “For the time being the right and the ‘centre,’ are united by their common hostility to the Opposition. To cut off the Opposition would inevitably accelerate the conflict between them.” Ibid., p. 67. From the same period see also “The Russian Opposition: Question and Answers,” in which Trotsky argued that the unity of the two majority factions concealed an explosive contradiction that would reveal itself in the event of the elimination of the opposition. See http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1927/1927-opposition.htm.

89. Trotsky would later explain this point as follows, “After the profound democratic revolution, which liberates the peasants from serfdom and gives them land, the feudal counterrevolution is generally impossible. The overthrown monarchy may reestablish itself in power and surround itself with medieval phantoms. But it is already powerless to reestablish the economy of feudalism. Once liberated from the fetters of feudalism, bourgeois relations develop automatically. They can be checked by no external force; they must themselves dig their own grave, having previously created their own gravedigger. It is altogether otherwise with the development of socialist relations. The proletarian revolution not only frees the productive forces from the fetters of private ownership but also transfers them to the direct disposal of the state that it itself creates. While the bourgeois state, after the revolution, confines itself to a police role, leaving the market to its own laws, the workers’ state assumes the direct role of economist and organizer. The replacement of one political regime by another exerts only an indirect and superficial influence upon market economy. On the contrary, the replacement of a workers’ government by a bourgeois or petty-bourgeois government would inevitably lead to the liquidation of the planned beginnings and, subsequently, to the restoration of private property. In contradistinction to capitalism, socialism is built not automatically but consciously.” Leon Trotsky, “The Workers’ State, Thermidor, and Bonapartism,” in Writings of Leon Trotsky (1934–35), p. 255. Emphasis in the original.

90. Platform of the Left Opposition, p. 10.

91. The variant contemplated at the time was essentially the one that played out later on in the collapse of the Soviet Union: a capitalist restoration guided by the upper crust of the Communist party, at first slowly, within the rhetorical parameters of the communist “tradition,” then rapidly, discarding the old ideological and institutional shell.

92. For a sympathetic discussion of Bukharin’s positions and role in this period, see Cohen, Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution, pp. 160–212. For a description of the policies involved in the deepening of the NEP, see Medvedev, pp. 75–76.
93. Platform of the Left Opposition, p. 67.
94. This episode was seen at the time as a sort of a crossing of the Rubicon, its significance exceeding the obvious antipathies between the two individuals. See Deutscher, The Prophet Unarmed, pp. 248–249.
95. Platform of the Left Opposition, p. 11.
96. Knei-Paz, pp. 400–401.
98. Trotsky and Bukharin had previously been in direct contact in the first few months of 1926, before the formation of the Joint Opposition. Cohen, Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution, p. 239. Even at that time their differences proved unbridgeable. Bukharin attempted to persuade Trotsky of the correctness of his rightist economic program. In response, Trotsky defended his own views on the economy, and also insisted on the need for Bukharin and the entire party to confront the problem of bureaucratism as a critical one. He warned Bukharin that, “the system of apparatus terror cannot come to a stop only at the so-called ideological deviations, real or imagined, but must inevitably spread throughout the entire life and activities of the organization.” Cited in Ibid., p. 268. Bukharin refused to engage Trotsky on this question and their exchanges came to an end.
99. In defending Bukharin’s role with respect to Stalinism, Stephen Cohen tends to overlook the questions discussed here. Though Cohen’s work is far from a vulgar apologia, it consistently downplays Bukharin’s constitutive complicity with Stalinism before his defeat, and reduces the question of the economic program as a desiccated matter of policy, playing down the political consequences and the means by which this was implemented. Only by discussing this period in such a truncated way can Cohen provide even a prima facie argument in defense of Bukharin’s sensible moderation.
102. Ibid., pp. 351–352, 374.
103. Ibid., pp. 376–377.
104. For a description and critique of this milieu, see Deutscher The Prophet Outcast, pp. 348, 361–363.
105. As in Marx’s analysis of Bonapartism, this is not to say that Trotsky saw Soviet centrum actually and permanently transcending class relations. For example he criticized the position of leftists like Hugo Urbahns, who described Stalin’s regime as Bonapartist in the sense that it did in fact attain total independence from existing class relations. See Leon Trotsky, “The Class Nature of the Soviet State,” in Writings of Leon Trotsky (1933–34) (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), pp. 107–108.

107. Ibid., p. 72.

108. In fact, they were both present in the person of Stalin as well, with his titles of general secretary of the bureaucracy, and generalissimo of the armed forces.

109. “The counter-revolution has not yet settled, and that is the reason for our . . . struggle against the Korschists and the other howlers. One physician says: the man is sick, there is hope of curing him; it is my duty to do all in my power to put him on his feet again. Another says: no, he must die, and turns his back on the patient. What can these two physicians have in common?” Leon Trotsky, “On the Question of Thermidor and Bonapartism,” p. 72.


111. For example, in a 1933 writing directed against the type exemplified by Souvarine, Urbahns and others: “To these gentlemen the dictatorship of the proletariat is simply an imponderable concept, an ideal norm not to be realized upon our sinful planet. Small wonder that ‘theoreticians’ of this stripe, insofar as they do not denounce altogether the word dictatorship, strive to smear over the irreconcilable contradiction between the latter and bourgeois democracy.” Leon Trotsky, “The Class Nature of the Soviet State,” p. 106.

112. In the first systematic statement of his mature position on Stalinism, the October 1933 article “The Class Nature of the Soviet State,” Trotsky immediately found himself engaged in fierce debates against those leftists who thought that his revision of the position toward Stalinism was not sufficiently radical. Having recognized the utter bankruptcy of the Comintern, Trotsky had to explain why it was not correct to “recognize the simultaneous . . . liquidation of the proletarian dictatorship in the USSR.” See Leon Trotsky, “The Class Nature of the Soviet State,” p. 101.

113. For example, in a speech given in the Reichstag in 1931, a Stalinist declared that “Fascist rule, a fascist government, does not frighten us. It will collapse sooner than any other.” Cited in Medvedev, p. 439.

114. For an excellent explanation of how Hitler’s victory was far from inevitable, and how his road to power was paved by the criminal policies of the Stalinists, see David North, “A Critical Review of Daniel Goldhagen’s Hitler’s Willing Executioners,” http://www.wsws.org/history/1997/apr1997/fascism.shtml.

115. Trotsky’s first statement of his new perspective is found in the July 1933 article, “It is Impossible to Remain in the same International with the Stalins, Manuilskys, Lozovskys & Co.” See Leon Trotsky, The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2001), pp. 495–503. In this text, Trotsky also begins to wrestle with the question of the need for a new international.

116. Already in 1929, Trotsky was able to capture the logic that would lead to more ruinous disasters and flamboyant betrayals later on. If the construction
of socialism in the Soviet Union, rather than the international extension of the revolution, was the strategic pivot around which all policy ought to proceed, it would then be possible to come to an understanding with the imperialist countries, pawning off revolutionary movements abroad in exchange for diplomatic and military concessions. The events of post-World War II in Greece are one of many concrete examples of this process. This logic implied, moreover, that the various national Communist parties had to remain fully under the control of Moscow, and thus be permanently deprived of the opportunity to grow and take root in the soil of their own national realities. Trotsky developed this analysis in *The Third International after Lenin*. For example: “The new doctrine proclaims that socialism can be built on the basis of a national state if only there is no intervention. From this there can and must follow (notwithstanding all pompous declarations in the draft program) a collaborationist policy towards the foreign bourgeoisie with the object of averting intervention, as this will guarantee the construction of socialism, that is to say, will solve the main historical question. The task of the parties in the Comintern assumes, therefore, an auxiliary character; their mission is to protect the USSR from intervention and not to fight for the conquest of power.” Trotsky, *The Third International after Lenin*, p. 79.

117. George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*, exactly because it was written from a standpoint that was significantly removed from the factional allegiances of the time, can provide the basic elements for this sort of assessment.


119. Trotsky demonstrated how even Stalin at the time opposed, as a matter of course, the outlook of socialism in one country. Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, pp. 1227–1275.

120. Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, p. 79.

121. “At times [Trotsky] maintained that the chief of cause of degeneration was the delay in the outbreak of the world revolution . . . on the other hand, he maintained equally often that the defeat of the revolution in Europe was the fault of the Soviet bureaucracy. It thus remained in doubt which phenomenon was the cause and which the effect.” Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), vol. 3, p. 192.

122. The question of dialectics became crucial in the last few years of Trotsky’s life, when he entered into debates with some of the figures of American Trotskyism. The texts pertinent to these controversies are collected in Leon Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism*.


124. Ibid., p. 36.
126. For example, for a long period the regime officially denied the existence of inflation, and actually crafted its policies on the basis of that delusion. Ibid., pp. 60–65.
127. Ibid., pp. 68–73.
128. Ibid., pp. 19–38.
129. Trotsky takes up this question directly in *The Third International after Lenin*, but also in *The Revolution Betrayed*, pp. 80, 165–174.
131. Ibid., p. 216.
132. In 1933 the International Left Opposition became the International Communist League. A period of discussion and contact with various international political groups ensued. An important political document in this preparatory period is the 1935 “Open Letter for the Fourth International,” in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1935–36)*, pp. 19–30. The actual founding of the Fourth International took place in 1938.
134. Ibid., pp. 77–78.
135. Ibid., p. 41.
137. “[A] further development of the accumulated contradictions can as well lead to socialism as back to capitalism . . . on the road to capitalism the counter-revolution would have to break the resistance of the workers . . . on the road to socialism the workers would have to overthrow the bureaucracy. In the last analysis, the question will be decided by a struggle of living social forces, both on the national and the world arena.” Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, p. 216.
138. Ibid., p. 51. Trotsky’s designation was not of a strict character, as he explained: “We frequently call the Soviet bureaucracy a caste, underscoring thereby its shut-in character, its arbitrary rule, and the haughtiness of the ruling stratum which considers that its progenitors issued from the divine lips of Brahma whereas the popular masses originated from the grosser portions of his anatomy. But even this definition does not of course possess a strictly scientific character. Its relative superiority lies in this, that the makeshift character of the term is clear to everybody, since it would enter nobody’s mind to identify the Moscow oligarchy with the Hindu caste of Brahmins. The old sociological terminology did not and could not prepare a name for a new social event which is the process of evolution (degeneration) and which has not assumed stable forms.” Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism*, p. 45.
139. In considering the character of the Stalinist bureaucracy as a caste, one should also consider its inability to produce its own new and independent
ideological outlook. Itself a mere distortion in the sociological realm, it was only able to produce vulgar ideological distortions of Marxism. Michael Löwy makes this point in his interesting discussion of the Lysenko affair, “Stalinist Ideology and Science” in Tariq Ali (ed.), The Stalinist Legacy (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1985), p. 168.

140. Explaining the roots of the bureaucracy as a caste in a functional sense, Trotsky wrote, “When there is enough goods in a store, the purchasers can come whenever they want to. When there is little goods, the purchasers are compelled to stand in line. When the lines are very long, it is necessary to appoint a policeman to keep order. Such is the starting point of the power of the Soviet bureaucracy. It ‘knows’ who is to get something and who has to wait . . . Soviet economy had to lift itself from its poverty to a somewhat higher level before fat deposits of privilege became possible. The present state of production is still far from guaranteeing all necessities to everybody. But it is already adequate to give significant privileges to a minority, and convert inequality into a whip for the spurring of the majority.” Trotsky, The Revolution Betrayed, p. 96. Explaining the rise of the caste in a fuller historical sense, Trotsky added, “While the first attempt to create a state cleansed of bureaucratism fell foul, in the first place, of the unfamiliarity of the masses with self-government, the lack of qualified workers devoted to socialism, etc., it very soon after these immediate difficulties encountered others more profound. That reduction of the state to functions of ‘accounting and control,’ with a continual narrowing of the function of compulsion, demanded by the party program, assumed at least a relative condition of general contentment. Just this necessary condition was lacking. No help came from the West. The power of the democratic soviets proved cramping, even unendurable, when the task of the day was to accommodate those privileged groups whose existence was necessary for defense, for industry, for technique and science. In this decidedly not ‘socialistic’ operation, taking from ten and giving to one, there crystallized out and developed a powerful caste of specialists in distribution.” Ibid., pp. 50–51.

141. “The individual bureaucrat cannot transmit to his heirs his rights in the exploitation of the state apparatus. The bureaucracy enjoys its privileges under the form of an abuse of power. It conceals its income; it pretends that as a special social group it does not even exist. Its appropriation of a vast share of the national income has the character of social parasitism. All this makes the position of the commanding Soviet stratum in the highest degree contradictory, equivocal, and undignified, notwithstanding the completeness of its power and the smoke screen of flattery that conceals it.” Ibid., p. 212.

142. The history of the concept of “state capitalism,” applied to the Soviet Union to capture its non-socialist character, has a long history. Kautsky used it in his polemics against the Bolsheviks. See Perry Anderson, “Trotsky’s Interpretation of Stalinism,” in Tariq Ali (ed.), The Stalinist Legacy, p. 125. In the
mid-1920s Zinoviev also used it, incongruously, to criticize Stalinism. See Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, p. 193, and Medvedev, *Let History Judge*, p. 46. The concept was later appropriated by many strands of Left-Communism.

143. “The Stalinist bureaucracy smashed the Left Opposition in order to safeguard and entrench itself as a privileged caste. But in the struggle for its own positions, it found itself compelled to take from the program of the Left Opposition all those measures that alone made it possible to save the social basis of the Soviet state. That is a priceless political lesson!” Trotsky, “The Workers’ State, Thermidor, and Bonapartism,” in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1934–35)*, pp. 244–245.

144. To explain this politically delicate point Trotsky resorted to a comparison with the various political forms proved historically compatible with the existence of a capitalist society—some more brutal and repulsive than others, but all the expression of the dominant political position of capital: “We shall here limit ourselves solely to the question of whether the factual dictatorship of the bureaucracy may be called the dictatorship of the proletariat. The terminological difficulty here arises from the fact that the term dictatorship is used sometimes in a restricted, political sense and, at other times, in a more profound, sociological sense. We speak of the ‘dictatorship of Mussolini’ and, at the same time, declare that fascism is only the instrument of finance capital. Which is correct? Both are correct, but on different planes. It is incontestable that the entire executive power is concentrated in Mussolini’s hands. But it is no less true that the entire actual content of the state activity is dictated by the interests of finance capital. The social domination of a class (its dictatorship) may find extremely diverse political forms. This is attested by the entire history of the bourgeoisie, from the Middle Ages to the present day.” Trotsky, “The Workers’ state, Thermidor, and Bonapartism,” in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1934–35)*, p. 247. Emphasis in the original.

145. Ibid., p. 245. Emphasis in the original.

146. “The revolution . . . will not be social, like the October revolution of 1917. It is not a question this time of changing the economic foundations of society, of replacing certain forms of property with other forms . . . The overthrow of the Bonapartist caste will, of course, have deep social consequences, but in itself it will be confined within the limits of political revolution.” Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, p. 246.

147. “But let us suppose that Hitler . . . invades territories occupied by the Red Army. Under these conditions, partisans of the Fourth International, without changing in any way their attitude toward the Kremlin oligarchy, will advance to the forefront, as the most urgent task of the hour, the military resistance against Hitler. The workers will say: ‘We cannot cede to Hitler the overthrowing of Stalin; that is our own task.’ During the military struggle
against Hitler, the revolutionary workers will strive to enter into the closest possible comradely relations with the rank-and-file fighters of the Red Army. While arms in hand they deal blows to Hitler, the Bolshevik-Leninists will at the same time conduct revolutionary propaganda against Stalin preparing his overthrow.” Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism*, p. 63.

148. Thus in the case of the Soviet occupation of Poland, it was important to consider both the resulting social change and the criminal means by which this was implemented: “The primary political criterion for us is not the transformation of property relations in this or another area, however important these may be in themselves, but rather the change in the consciousness and organization of the world proletariat, the raising of their capacity for defending former conquests and accomplishing new ones. From this one, and the only decisive standpoint, the politics of Moscow, taken as a whole, completely retains its reactionary character and remains the chief obstacle on the road to world revolution. Our general appraisal of the Kremlin and the Comintern does not, however, alter the particular fact that the stratification of property in the occupied territories is in itself a progressive measure.” Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism*, pp. 61–62. Emphasis in the original.

149. The following excerpt from a letter to Shachtman provides an example of the kind of debates internal to the Fourth International that Trotsky was engaged in, and illustrates the continuity in his position. Responding to Shachtman, Trotsky wrote: “You insist especially on the necessity of abandoning the slogan for the unconditional defense of the USSR, whereupon you interpret this slogan in the past as our unconditional support of every diplomatic and military action of the Kremlin; i.e., of Stalin's policy. No, my dear Shachtman, this presentation doesn't correspond to the ‘concreteness of events.’ Already in 1927 we proclaimed in the Central Committee: ‘For the socialist fatherland? Yes! For the Stalinist course? Not!’ Then you seem to forget the so called ‘thesis on Clemenceau’ which signified that in the interest of the genuine defense of the USSR, the proletarian vanguard can be obliged to eliminate the Stalin government and replace it with its own. This was proclaimed in 1927! Five years later we explained to the workers that this change of government can be effectuated only by political revolution. Thus we separated fundamentally our defense of the USSR as a workers state from the bureaucracy's defense of the USSR. Whereupon you interpret our past policy as unconditional support of the diplomatic and military activities of Stalin! Permit me to say that this is a horrible deformation of our whole position not only since the creation of the Fourth International but since the very beginning of the Left Opposition.” Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism*, p. 92.


In the process of organizing the Fourth International, Trotsky developed a personal and political rapport with many outstanding figures who were persuaded by his perspective. As a rule, such men and women had to overcome considerable obstacles even to simply learn what this perspective actually was. The American James Cannon, for example, had come under Trotsky’s influence in the Soviet Union after accidentally coming in possession of a copy of his criticism of the Stalinist program for the Comintern. After his expulsion from the Communist Party, Cannon became one of the founders of the Trotskyist movement in the United States.

One of the most interesting examples of this process is Trotsky’s political relationship with Andrés Nin, who was for some time part of the forces that were orbiting around the Fourth International, but never formally joined it. As a result of political differences with the program of the Fourth International, Nin founded and led the Spanish POUM, which remained outside of the Trotskyist movement. Trotsky was at times patient and at times merciless in his criticism of Nin. The correspondence between the two is remarkable in part because it illuminates some of the most important political processes at work in the Spanish Civil War, and in part because of the tragic character of the outcome. Against Trotsky’s persistent advice, Nin decided to join the popular front government, submitting himself and his political organization to the disastrous conduct and eventually savage repression of the Stalinists. Nin was tortured and executed by them along with many of his comrades. This correspondence is published in Leon Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973).

The most remarkable instance of this fight is no doubt Trotsky’s international campaign to expose the lies of the Moscow trials, particularly because of the unevenness of the forces at the disposal of each side. This unevenness illustrates how the political forces mobilized by Trotsky, considered by most commentators to be meager and insignificant, constituted in fact a mortal challenge against the Stalinist regime. It is no accident that Trotsky, in spite of the paucity of his forces by any “objective” measurement, was considered to be the regime’s number one enemy, and that, according to its propaganda, his shadow lurked behind every threat and failure.


Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, pp. 216–217. The restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union, along with the “neoliberal” resurgence of free markets in the West has revealed the temporary character of processes that appeared to many observers to be permanent.

158. “The real passage to socialism cannot fail to appear incomparably more complicated, more heterogeneous, more contradictory than was foreseen in the general historical scheme. Marx spoke about the dictatorship of the proletariat and its future withering away but said nothing about bureaucratic degeneration of the dictatorship. We have observed and analyzed for the first time in experience such a degeneration. Is this a revision of Marxism?” Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism*, p. 77.

159. For example, “They were all capitulators, persons who had confessed on many occasions, accusing themselves in their confessions of the most shameful actions and the lowest instincts; persons who had renounced all political conceptions, all reason for living, all personal dignity . . . For years these ex-revolutionaries, demoralized and morally broken, had flitted back and forth between life and death. Were narcotics . . . necessary? . . . No, at the trial the defendants gave themselves the lie as they had done before in their innumerable confessions. The GPU took plenty of time to extort from its victims increasingly complete ‘confessions.’ Today ‘A’ admitted a little ‘fact.’ If ‘B’ does not admit the same thing it implies that all his past confessions and humiliations were ‘lies’ . . . ‘B’ hastens to admit what ‘A’ admitted, and even a little more. And now it’s ‘C’s’ turn again. To avoid any overly crude contradictions, they are given the opportunity, if they wish, to elaborate their theme in common. If ‘D’ refuses to associate himself with this he risks losing all hope of saving himself. So he outdoes the others in order to prove his goodwill . . . And now all the others must align their lies with those of ‘E.’ . . . The infernal game continues . . . Jules Romains shows (in his *Les Creatures*) how it is possible without having any ‘idea’ or ‘theme’ to write a truly poetical work by taking as a point of departure a play on words. The GPU works thus. These gentlemen, having at their disposal neither facts nor a completed plan, construct their amalgam by a play on ‘confessions.’ If one or another of the confessions appears inconvenient in the end, it is quite simply omitted as an unnecessary hypothesis . . . From time to time they give their victims a provisional liberty in order to allow the rebirth of vague hopes. At the first opportunity those who have been freed are arrested once more. Thus ceaselessly tossed between hope and despair these men become little by little the shadow of their former selves.” Leon Trotsky, “Shame!” in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1935–36)* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2004), pp. 571–572. For an argument about the remarkable character of Trotsky’s analysis of the psychology of the accused, see Vladimir Rogovin, 1937: *Stalin’s Year of Terror* (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 1998). Rogovin’s chapter “Why Did They Confess?” (pp.164–178) is particularly interesting for its comparison between Trotsky’s account and Arthur Koestler’s famous *Darkness at Noon*. 

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163. “The comrades are very indignant about the Stalin-Hitler pact. It is comprehensible. They wish to get a revenge on Stalin. Very good. But today we are weak, and we cannot immediately overthrow the Kremlin. Some comrades try then to find a purely verbalistic satisfaction: they strike out from the USSR the title, workers state, as Stalin deprives a disgraced functionary of the Order of Lenin. I find it, my dear friend, a bit childish.” Leon Trotsky, “Letter to Sherman Stanley,” in *In Defense of Marxism*, pp. 66–67.
165. This is an important question because, beginning from the early period of the Comintern, Trotsky had emphasized the extraordinary significance of American capitalism. In a 1929 interview he stated, “The potential preponderance of the United States in the world market is far greater than was the actual preponderance of Great Britain in the most flourishing days of her world hegemony . . . This potential strength must inevitably transfer itself into kinetic form, and the world will one day witness a great outburst of Yankee truculence in every sector of our planet. The historian of the future will inscribe in his books: the famous crisis of 1930–3-? was a turning point in the whole history of the United States in that it evoked such a reorientation of spiritual and political aims that the old Monroe Doctrine, ‘America for Americans,’ came to be superseded by a new doctrine, ‘The Whole World for the Americans.’” Trotsky, *Leon Trotsky Speaks*, pp. 241–242. See also the many documents from the early Comintern congress in which Trotsky discusses the significance of the rise of American capitalism, and particularly its relation to the decline of Europe. Leon Trotsky, *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, vol. 1 and 2 (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2003).
166. In the course of this debate, Trotsky noted that the stark dichotomy being discussed may have had its uses, even if actually incorrect: “An alternative of this kind—socialism or totalitarian servitude—has . . . enormous importance in agitation, because in its light the necessity for socialist revolution appears most graphically.” Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism*, p. 77.
168. In fact, Trotsky regarded his late political work as more critical than the role he played during the actual revolution: “I cannot speak of the ‘indispensability’ of my own work, even for the period from 1917 to 1921. But now my work is ‘indispensable’ in the full sense of the word . . . The collapse of the two Internationals [of social democracy and Stalinism] has posed a problem which none of the leaders of these Internationals is at all equipped to solve. The vicissitudes of my personal fate have confronted me with this problem and armed me with important experience in dealing with it. There is now no one except me to carry out the mission of arming a new generation with the revolutionary method over the heads of the leaders of the Second and Third Internationals.” Cited in Alex Callinicos, *Trotskyism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 22. As I have explained, one of the principal concerns animating Deutscher’s work is an attempt to disprove Trotsky’s assessment on this score.

169. Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism*, p. 57. After the 1939 debate, Trotsky reaffirmed this long-term perspective in his “Manifesto of the Conference of the Fourth International.” He wrote, “It is not a question of a single uprising. It is a question of an entire revolutionary epoch . . . It is necessary to prepare for long years, if not decades, of wars, uprisings, brief interludes or truces, new wars, and new uprisings . . . The questions of tempos and time intervals is of enormous importance; but it alters neither the general historical perspective nor the direction of our policy. The conclusion is a simple one: it is necessary to carry on the work of educating and organizing the proletarian vanguard with tenfold energy.” Cited in Ernest Mandel, *Trotsky as Alternative* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 10.


171. Leon Trotsky, “In Defense of the Russian Revolution,” in *Leon Trotsky Speaks*, pp. 260–261. This was a subtle reminder—Trotsky had been granted permission to travel to Denmark on strict conditions that limited the kind of political appeals he could make—that the task of a new revolutionary upsurge was left to the young generations.


173. Among the more interesting products of this split was the ferocious and very instructive debate between Trotsky and Burnham over the meaning and value of the dialectical method. See Leon Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism*.


175. The size and significance of the Trotskyist movement, however, is often underestimated. Isaac Deutscher, as already noted, stands as an example of this tendency. This point would deserve a longer discussion, in part because what qualifies as “Trotskyism” requires careful consideration. Nevertheless, it should be noted, for example, that while the old Communist party in France is mired in what appears to be an irreversible crisis, self-proclaimed Trotskyist groups appear to be on an electoral upswing
and are playing a significant role in the politics of that country. A similar story could be told of England (the Socialist Workers Party’s pivotal role in the RESPECT coalition and George Galloway’s successful electoral campaign) and Italy (the sizable and growing “Trotskyist” tendencies within Communist Refoundation) as well. In a more historical vein, a discussion of one of the most remarkable moments in the annals of Trotskyism when it acquired a mass character and rose to the forefront of an explosive class struggle is found in Farrell Dobbs’ account of the 1934 Minneapolis Teamster strike. Farrell Dobbs, Teamster Rebellion (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1986).


NOTES TO CHAPTER SIX

4. At the time Silone began to work on his book, the onset of the third period reduced the prevailing Communist attitude toward fascism to a set of crude ultraleft slogans. Even after the end of third period policy, however, the Comintern continued to understand fascism, in the word of Georgi Dimitrov, as simply, “the power exercised by finance capital.” Cited in Renzo De Felice, Le interpretazioni del fascismo (Bari: Laterza, 1998), p. 74. Silone’s alternative analysis featured many similarities—in terms of its sophistication, content, and opposition to the Stalinist perspective—to that developed by Trotsky and the Left Opposition.
6. It should also be noted that the Marxist unity of theory and practice is not to be understood as an uncomplicated identity. This unity can instead be constituted by separate and specific moments. To illustrate this, one can think, for example, of Marx and Engels’ long retreat from practice into theory, lasting from the failure of the 1848–49 revolutions to the founding of the First International. Marx and Engels in some ways welcomed this retreat in the sense that they understood the need for a long period of a theoretical study and rearming of their party.

9. Anderson did not believe that Gramsci suitably represented the negative characteristics of Western Marxism, only that certain elements already present in the prison Gramsci, once amplified and distorted, became symbolic of its later degeneration. In the same way, Trotsky was the emblematic figure of “Eastern Marxism,” only in the sense that he expressed sharply traits such as political engagement and concreteness that were to be grotesquely disfigured later by Stalinism.
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