



Trotsky over Mauss: Anthropological Theory and the October 1917 Commemoration

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Birth of Karl Marx, 200 years. The first publication of *Das Kapital*, 150 years. The Russian and German Revolutions, 100 years. Paris and Prague 1968, 50 years. In a sense, 2017 and 2018 seem over-determined. No escape, not even for those who are not interested in the timeline of the Left and/or live through other temporal narratives, like Vladimir Putin, who kept open talk of the revolutionary centennial in Russia to almost zero.

Putin serves as a pointer for the larger contemporary context: The Western and Southern Left has willfully chosen amnesia of the Russian revolution too, and that since long. The same reformist Left is also at the end of its shelf life, paralyzed before the choices it is forced to make between participatory capitalism on terms dictated by globalized capital and participatory democracy cum popular sovereignty. Ten years after the financial crash of 2008–2014 and the deepest recession since the 1930s, a vindictive nationalist Right is becoming ever more dominant in much of the Global North. The Global South is not that different.

Anthropologists think and talk a lot about social memory but they do not seem to feel intellectually at home with past world-historical big events and their commemorations, not even if they form the backdrop to, and are the object of, contemporary social memory-making, or if the events were formative for their own discipline, even if by negation. Perhaps anthropologists do not like their size? Or is it that they simply pass on their “past-ness”? Size plus past-ness is not for anthropologists, who do small and contemporary?

More: One might forgive a foreign observer who gains the impression that anthropology is a field without much of a memory anyway. It appears constantly thrilled by new stories from its endlessly moving mosaic of fieldwork fascinations, often wrapped in a fresh sprinkling of abstract excitements proudly dug up from the work of yesteryear’s fashionable thinkers from elsewhere. Yes, indeed, I am much too harsh. The point is, this picture is recognizable.

As to the fashionable thinkers, there has lately been one major exception to the often maligned rule of conceptual import. Interestingly, this thinker has some intimate intellectual connections to the Russian revolution, though perhaps mainly by negation. Marcel Mauss’ *Essay sur le Don* (1925), “The Gift,” was re-issued (and re-translated by Jane Guyer) in 2016.

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This got a lot of attention in anthropology circles. Particularly so in London and environs, the well-chosen home of HAU, a fast-proliferating anthropological enterprise whose name is derived from the *Maori* word for the gift as discussed in Mauss' work. The new edition was commissioned by HAU for the festive opening of its new book series (with Chicago U.P., HAU imprint). The series will feature the classics of "ethnographic theory." This is the somewhat oxymoronic banner under which the HAU band gathers. They deem Mauss' work a preeminent example, despite Mauss never having done any ethnography at all.

So this is where we are, among the Left, and in anthropology: a willfully forgotten world historical revolution—including its thinkers—and a Marcel Mauss celebrated among others for what he has not done. Is this a spurious connection? No, it is a salient and significant one.

In fact, the Russian revolution formed a direct motivational background for Mauss' writing of the *Essay*. Not just the Russian revolution, but the emergence of communism and more generally the rise since 1890 of a Marxist Left in the German, Austrian, and Russian empires. Mauss had visited the Soviet Union in 1920 and wrote a sociological appraisal of Bolshevism.¹ The Gift is a response to the Marxist revolutionary outbreaks in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of WWI by a French Durkheimian sociologist who believed in cooperativism, the market, property, and the possibilities of civilized collaboration among the classes in the framework of a moralized national state. Those "Eastern" revolutions were driven by Marxist thinker-revolutionaries who had refused to support the war. For them, it was a criminal imperialist slaughter waged by capitalist-militarist states and repressive state elites in search of imperial glory as an antidote against their accelerating decline. These thinker-revolutionaries had not been leading academic lives. They were activists in the emigration (Lenin, Trotsky, etc.) or had simply been locked up (Rosa Luxemburg from 1915 onwards).

Mauss, in contrast, was a rising academic of good upbringing, solid bourgeois family background—cotton manufacturers in the Alsace—and important kinship connections. He had enjoyed his non-academic life during the war. The war allowed him a certain escape from the tutelage of his uncle Emile Durkheim, who had concertedly cultivated him as his paramount intellectual heir. Mauss could now throw off the family pressures, a liberty which his prior engagement with French mutualism and cooperativism had apparently not fully allowed.

Marcel Mauss did not like the anti-capitalist and anti-war revolutions that were playing themselves out East of the Rhine, nor the associated international Marxisms. They were crude and violent, in his eyes. Even though there were also hopeful signs, in particular the Russian cooperative movements and the promises of the Soviets/works councils, he decidedly disliked their leaderships and dominant ideologies. He may not have been an open French nationalist, but he did believe in an enlightened France (and in a liberal England, see below). He had never been a critic of imperialist war, no international pacifist, nor an analyst of capitalist imperial state forms. He hardly used the words capitalism and empire. There was the market, there was commerce, there was property, there was civilization, there were citizens, and there was an encompassing state and its moral representations. As a Leftist, he was critical of a severely unbalanced modernity. He disliked what he called wage slavery and was a strong proponent of the cooperative movement in France, seeking to transform wage dependency into ownership by collectives. A workerist update to a romantic image of the old guild system, a bit Left of his uncle Durkheim. But the Marxist ideas of capitalism and empire argued that all these legally established spheres were not really separate things, that bourgeois liberal democracy was

¹ For Mauss, see Fournier 2006; Gane 1992 (which includes Mauss' analysis of Bolshevism); Graeber 2001, 2014; Hart 2007, 2014; Sigaud 2002.

ultimately based in the exploitation of an expanding dispossessed proletariat by ever-accumulating capital. It sought to expose the socially corruptive inner connections of this modern class configuration from the proletarian point of view, and demanded a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat against capital, so as to bundle markets, property, and states in ways that would make them work for the majority, as in the Russian and German revolutions.

The Gift was written just as the last flames of revolution East of the river Rhine were dying—smoldered in blood or fought to a standstill, by France among others—and it was published while Europe and the world were uneasily settling on what turned out to be a swift descent into a new and even more barbarous mass slaughter. The essay was not only a critique of Adam Smith's embrace of "commercial society," with its celebration of the liberal *homo economicus*. It was even more a rejection of Soviet and German Communism and the Marxist modes of analyses of class struggle behind it. It was also a *sotto voce* warning to the rulers of France, as well as to the French socialists and emerging communists, not to ignore the basis of humanity in reciprocity and the human attachment to a moral representation of society as a whole, in the line of Durkheim. "The Gift" versus class struggle and the revolution. The history of mankind was not as Marx had thought the history of class struggle; it was the history of social cohesion through reciprocity and solidarity. Public amnesia about the Russian revolution, Left-wing distanciation from it, and critical anthropology's celebration of The Gift are intimately connected. They are one syndrome, one sign of the times, even while not reducible to each other.

In this essay, I will discuss some of the recent centennial literature on the Russian revolution. I am interested in how the revolution in its centennial moment is currently approached, remembered, and explained. I am especially interested in how current students of October 1917 engage with the central liberal claim against all egalitarian revolutions. Derived from Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville, that claim argues that revolutionary egalitarianism inevitably ushers into ideological radicalism, authoritarianism, state terror, destruction, mass bloodshed, and what later theorists called "totalitarianism." The social democratic Western Left, too, has bought into this hegemonic liberal idea and has long accepted that there is a more or less straight line from October 1917 to the Gulag, and from Lenin's thinking to Stalin's practice, indeed even straight from Marx to Stalin by way of Lenin. The paradox is that this liberal thesis of continuity exactly conforms to what Stalinism has always claimed. This is then one of the few points on which cold war liberalism and Stalinism easily agreed: one line from Lenin to Stalin. How do current commemorative authors deal with this shared liberal-Stalinist teleology?

I will later shortly come back to Mauss and the revolution. My point in doing so will be that the intellectual and methodological habitus and tools of Lenin, Trotsky, Bucharin, and other revolutionaries—Marxist theorists with no time for "ethnographic theory" but deeply embedded in the actual making of history—were in some non-trivial ways greatly superior to the celebrated "ethnographic theory" of Marcel Mauss.

Remembering October 1917

Yuri Slezkine's impressive "House of Government" (Princeton U.P. 2017) and Marc Steinberg's "The Russian Revolution, 1905-1921" ("Oxford Histories," Oxford U.P. 2017), while very different books, align with each other in some significant ways: both very post-ideological. Slezkine and Steinberg are accomplished historians of Russia, working in the

USA. Both have worked with *petite histoires* within larger histories, combining “new social history”-like approaches with the “new cultural history” type of interests, close to the anthropological spirit. Slezkine has published on Jewish Russian history and on Russian women in and after the revolution. Steinberg, a student of Charles Tilly, has focused on workers, peasants, and soldiers before and during the revolution.

Interestingly, these books align on a retrospective vision of the revolution with the leaders largely left out, though they do so in very different ways. Steinberg sees the Bolsheviks as merely acting within a long-run polarization of Russian society, a polarization that, in the context of war, hunger, and defeat, could not but escalate into popular insurgency. The meaning of Lenin, Trotsky, and other Bolshevik leaders is thus limited to articulating and channeling popular rage from April to October. This, despite a strong Bolshevik underground movement in St. Petersburg well before 1917, with a few hundred workers and soldiers the “military revolutionary committee” headed by Trotsky, and instigated by Lenin, could simply take over a government that had already fallen apart amidst mass insurgency.

After thus cutting the Bolshevik leadership down to size, Steinberg, writing for a general public, makes the next crucial political and theoretical move: He suspends all judgment and abstains from further scrutiny of the Bolsheviks and their policies. He confides that they have his sympathy and that posterity should be humble in judging them in the light of the enormous unforeseen problems and violence confronting the revolution in 1918–1921. But there is little precise discussion here of what exactly happened in those years. Steinberg also stops strictly in 1921, which allows him to remain more or less silent on the rise of Stalinism. Revolutions are inevitably risky undertakings, he philosophizes. They are violent events that produce internal and external counter-violence and as a rule run out of hand. As disillusion sets in, ideologists take over that seek to forcefully continue the process and satisfy their radical categories, the Robespierre Syndrome, such as in the “war communism” starting in the summer of 1918. He thus largely seems to accept the dominant Burkean or Tocquevilleian wisdom about revolutionary radicalization and impending bloody disaster. But he does so without the usual liberal abhorrence.

His book ends with the end of the civil war and the emergence of the New Economic Policy, at a moment of communism in deliberate retreat. Halting there supports his agnostic position. The radicals learnt their lesson, he seems to imply. He also suggests that the turn to Stalinism, violent collectivization of the countryside, and forced industrialization and urbanization after 1928, and then to the Gulag, may not have been a necessary outcome of the revolution. But a tough discussion of that crucial issue remains beyond the scope of this book.

Instead, in a series of chapters, Steinberg rather lovingly pays attention to workers, peasants, and women as they experienced their revolution. Revolutions may be bloody and risky, but they are necessary, creative, liberating, and emancipatory, Steinberg emphasizes. Here, among the people’s histories, we also finally meet some of the key protagonists. Alexandra Kollontai, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Leon Trotsky are represented as individuals among many others who exemplified this risky, creative, and emancipatory revolutionary drive.

The book is written against contemporary public disinterest in the Russian revolution. Steinberg is motivated by Occupy and the squares movements of the last decennium. He hopes that a new generation will once again gain inspiration from large-scale imaginative revolutionary processes such as in Russia in 1917–1921. But the possible program of such a revolution and its possible relationship to Petersburg 1917 remains as much absent here as in the Occupy movements that Steinberg admires. This is all in all, then, a very post-

ideological reading of what was arguably one of the most intense ideological confrontations of the exuberantly ideological “short” twentieth century.

Slezkine’s “House of Government” is an academic tome of more than 1000 pages (congratulations to Princeton U.P.) that is probably not expressly written for the Centennial occasion. I cannot do justice to this impressive and beautiful work here. The revolution here is a mere fact that precedes the book. The study looks at a cohort of second-rank revolutionaries who became top Soviet administrators and experts in the 1920s. They were offered apartments in “The House of Government,” opposite the Kremlin on the other side of the Moskva river, a residential complex built in the first years of Stalinism in exemplary constructivist style with restaurants, theater, and cinema. With painstaking detail, Slezkine follows the biographies of Bolsheviks within this residential community. He approaches them basically as a sect. This seems right for the later 1920s and 1930s as they become a target in the Stalinist descent into violence. The House of Government then becomes an intimate community of fear and mourning. Stalin was keen on wiping out all those who had actually been involved in the revolution and who might continue to subscribe to its democratic and egalitarian ideals. Worse, they might remember that Stalin had been a mere secondary actor and not quite Lenin’s favorite. Here too then, a study with the top revolutionary actors left out, a refusal to reject Bolshevism as such, and one that in fact minutely explores the discontinuities between Bolshevik revolution and the Stalinist descent into violence without feeling the need to engage that debate head on.

Both Steinberg and Slezkine have written books that are ethnographically rich and analytically modest. Does this underline that the Russian Revolution is indeed stuff for the museum more than for contemporary Left politics and analysis? Both appreciate the ideals of the revolution. Both fail to explain whether and why Stalinism was not the child of that revolution.

Sean McMeekin’s “The Russian Revolution: A New History” (Profile Books, 2017) is a resounding restatement of Cold War truths. No social history here, no sympathies for revolution. McMeekin is a US historian of the geopolitics of the Eastern front in the First World War (he published a book on German-Ottoman relationships). He seems keen to set himself up as a battle-ready defender of the old liberal claim that Stalin’s violence was already scripted in Lenin’s theories. Would Lenin have liked Stalinism, McMeekin asks rhetorically and answers with a loud and impatient yes. The book comes with blurbs by an impressive liberal squadron: Niall Ferguson, Richard Pipes, Orlando Figes. Lenin is once more established as an operator on the German payroll, a claim that first emerged from within the Kadet party and the Tsarist secret service after Lenin’s return to St. Petersburg in the sealed German train in April 1917. The October revolution is far from being an outcome of long-run social and political polarization dramatically escalated by war, as in Steinberg, Mieville, and Le Blanc (both, below), not much more here than an unfortunate result of Kerensky’s monumental incompetence, a Prime Minister who obviously “was working above his pay-grade.” The “Kornilov affair” of September 1917—the coup effort by the commander of the Russian army who was amassing troops against St. Petersburg and was thwarted by scrambled volunteer Red battalions—is belittled as another of Kerensky’s farces. McMeekin is keen to dispense retrospective advice: Kerensky should have kept Trotsky in jail, and the Tsar should have refused to go to war in 1914 etc. The revolution for him is the unfortunate outcome of governmental blundering.

The Bolsheviks are energetically belittled too. The working class was hardly interested in the Bolshevik vision of equality and socialization of property, McMeekin claims to know. The proletariat wanted out of the war and Lenin opportunistically promised them so. Lenin, also,

took his peasant policy of all land to the tiller from the Social Revolutionaries, not at all his own idea. Without such opportunism Lenin would never have made it, McMeekin judges. He then goes on to complain that after the revolution the Bolsheviks could only sustain themselves by “stealing” money from the Central Bank and buying “illegal arms” from Sweden and Germany (after Rapallo) with the stolen Gold of the Tsar and the sale of art stolen from the aristocracy and the church. Not serious, he seems to want to say. The Bolsheviks are also again depicted as a sect, a concept meant to magnify their isolation from the wider population and underline their inward-looking ritual behavior and cognitive deliriums, as in the cold war historiographies of Pipes, Conquest, and others. His story of the revolution focuses on the period of war communism, mid-1918 to 1921. The violence in this period is explained by the revolutionary execution of the bloody egalitarian utopia of the Left. There is little discussion of the agrarian issues, which were crucial. Nor do we learn that already under the Tsar in 1916–1917 famine was threatening, only forestalled by grain imports. For a geopolitical historian, McMeekin gives little serious attention from the point of view of the revolution to the foreign-supported civil war, the allied landing in Archangelsk, the trade embargo, and the cutting off of the international food supply. Nor to the exact sequences of events that turned a revolution that had been remarkably peaceful until April 1918 fast into a bloodbath. That bloodbath, of course, was not really produced by any such sequences. It was the scripted outcome of a violently imposed and criminally mistaken utopia.

McMeekin teaches at Bard College, a modestly Left-wing Liberal Arts college. His book is a warning to his students, radicalized since 2008, not to repeat the unforgivable errors of the revolutionary Left.

Verso has delivered a thrilling triplet of centennial books that forms an enjoyable antidote to liberal reiterations such as McMeekin's. No post-ideological strivings here either. The New Left publisher has lined up some of the most pertinent authors on the Marxist Left to bring together a necessary re-acquaintance with the 1917 revolution. China Mieville, Tariq Ali, and Slavoj Žižek have produced very different books that together do several important things. Like Steinberg, they place the revolution back into its longer run social and political history. But, more than Steinberg, they take the Russian revolutionary underground as a vital part of that background, including its engagement in international Marxist conversations.

But most importantly, all three place the revolution powerfully back into its global and internationalist context. Here we finally get to see October 1917 as a culmination in a transnational process of capitalist transformation and class formation. The universalization of the rule of capital turned peasants into urbanizing proletarians. This led to an international mobilization around reformist and revolutionary democratic politics, and to the First and Second International Working Men's Associations. The universalization of capital accumulation also led to imperialist rivalry, and that in its turn to world war, the context *sine qua non* for the emergence of communism. Rising local mass discontent fueled warmongering among conservative imperial elites, in particular those of the autocratic German, Austrian, and Russian empires, as they sought to solicit popular support for their rule by seeking out confrontation with foreign rivals. This was the context that led to war. The rise of democratic mass politics then culminated in 1917–1923 in a Europe-wide revolutionary/reformist anti-militarist breakthrough as beaten traditional militarist elites were pushed out or lost nerve everywhere, but in particular in the central and East European empires that were losing the war and were going to be broken up. This breakthrough led to the emergence of communist parties and to revolutionary urban communes that broke with the (pro-war) politics of the reformist social democratic parties; quick offers by scared elites of democratization (Germany, Ex-

Habsburg lands); expansions of the suffrage everywhere; the first rise of fascist (para) military counter-mobilizations in the Germanies, contracted by parliamentary social democrats seeking to violently repress communist insurrections; Western military intervention, directly and by proxy, in Russia; plus the arming of anti-revolutionary new republics in Finland, Poland, and Romania, in order to contain the Russian revolution and prevent a link-up between communist insurrections in Russia, Berlin, Munich, and Budapest.² A geopolitical historian such as McMeekin must know all of this. It is puzzling that he did not deem it sufficiently relevant as analytical frame for the Russian revolution, particularly also because this was the scale at which the communist revolutionaries themselves were thinking and acting. For its leadership, the Russian revolution was never meant to be anything else than the beginning of the European revolution, as Trotsky and Lenin repeated endlessly, even after the possibility thereof began to fade. Trotsky was calling for the formation of the Socialist United States of Europe. Neither believed that a revolution in Russia alone could be sustainable or could on its own ever be socialist, nor did Rosa Luxemburg. The German Spartacus insurgency of January 1919 and the Budapest commune a few months later were belated though explicit efforts to respond to and link up with the Russian revolution. In this light, Steinberg too is strangely non-internationalist. The Verso authors are no formal academics. Academia finds it obviously hard to get rid of the methodological nationalism that locks world processes up in reified often post hoc constructed stand-alone entities called nation states. In the case of the Russian revolution, this is even worse: Methodological nationalism naturalizes Stalin's "socialism in one country." A violent historical distortion that has apparently succeeded in producing public amnesia about that singular European World-revolution that was started in St. Petersburg, October 1917, and then gradually got locked up in what became the Soviet Union and failed.

Trotsky hovers, not surprisingly, over the books by Mieville and Ali (and over *Le Blanc*, below). Mieville's fantastic re-narration of the revolution feels like the contemporary version of Trotsky's classic "History" (1930). No falsification there, just addition, and even closer on the skin than in Trotsky's still authoritative close-up account. A wide reading of the classics and of recent research is cast into a style of almost filmic, Tarantino-like, fast storytelling (without references but with literature recommendations). A hugely enjoyable read. The chapter on the July insurrection in particular is thrilling and is on a par in literary qualities with Isaac Deutscher's ripping narration of the violent repression of the Kronstadt Rebellion in his Trotsky trilogy (1959/2003). This is again revolutionary history with the revolutionary leaders cut to size, as in Steinberg. Once more a dint of Trotsky here, paradoxically: a deep sense that formal political acts and slogans follow but then also feed into the mood in the street and the politicization of the Petersburg masses, who are brought on stage as the actual drivers of revolution. But more than Steinberg, and like Trotsky, Mieville does follow the key actors and their interactions with the street closely. The key actors are certainly not sufficient causes on their own, but their decisions and actions matter. They turn a rebellious mood into focused actions, slogans, and claims, an agenda. And they are essential for the organizational underbelly without which a fast-responding and forceful counter-politics cannot be sustained. This is a fantastic book.

Tariq Ali's "Dilemmas of Lenin" complements this fast-paced story of a year of revolution with a rather lovingly told slow-moving deeper history of the Left and its key persons in

² It is remarkable how little has been published about the German and Hungarian revolutions in 1918–1919 and the political confrontations in their aftermath. The commemoration of the end of WWI will be an opportunity: see recently Dent 2018 on Budapest, and Niess 2017 on Germany (hopefully to be translated).

Russia, focusing in particular on Lenin, but with lots of attention to women revolutionaries and to intimate relationships, and embedded in the development of the internationalist Left. The effect of the book is a keen sympathy for the humanity of Lenin and his circle of revolutionary friends.

How do Ali and Mieville, enthusiasts for revolution then and now, deal with the disasters that followed in Russia? Partly, their solution is, like Steinberg's, to leave the rise of Stalinism out of the picture by restricting their timeline to 1918 (Mieville) or 1924 (Ali). In other words, they too refuse to engage with the liberal teleology that links Lenin to the Gulag. Is this simply not a claim that authors on the Left should take seriously?

Ali and Mieville do engage, though, in an interesting and perhaps unintended mutual conversation about small facts that helped to produce single party rule, a conversation almost between the lines. The dictatorship of the proletariat was meant to be a better and more popular democracy than the bleak bourgeois parliaments of the West, a democracy of soviets, not the dictatorship over the state by one party, with which the phrase would soon become associated. And here, storytellers as they are, Ali and Mieville both focus on the relationship between Lenin and Julius Martov, the leader of the Left Mensheviks. Lenin and Martov had always been intimate friends, a lot of mutual liking. Sadly, the Menshevik/Bolshevik split had turned them into competitors. Mieville is harsh on Martov: Martov has a lot to explain for walking out of the Second All Russian Congress of the Soviets on the day of the revolution, Mieville judges. This, after the Congress had decided unanimously that the revolution, presented as a gift from Lenin who had just come out of hiding, deserved full support. By doing so, Mieville implies, Martov left the Bolsheviks on their own. His impulsive walkout meant the potential withdrawal of a broader legitimacy from the new revolutionary Soviet state at the very moment of its declaration. The new state would have to face the violent counter revolutionary wave—of which no one was thinking in October but which was inescapably coming (see below)—with impaired legitimacy.

Tariq Ali, however, reverses Mieville's judgment. He tells about Lenin's great affection for Martov, narrating how on his deathbed Lenin, who could not talk anymore, was concerned above all about Martov's health. Martov was dying as an emigrant in Paris in the same time. Lenin had Krupskaya sent special medicines to Martov. With these anecdotes, Ali seems to imply that Lenin could as well have given Martov more sympathy, more time, and a second chance to join the government in 1917 or 1918, before the violent escalations started. And why not accept Martov's offer to serve as a "loyal opposition"? The opening acts of what was supposed to be the beginning of the world revolution, Ali and Mieville seem to tell us, should not have been allowed to be poisoned by intimate trifles.

Zizek has made a selection of Lenin's essays for the centennial. The motto of these, as well as of Tariq Ali's "Dilemmas of Lenin," could have been taken from Bertrand Russell: in the person of Vladimir Illyich one cannot find any "striving for power or glory." Zizek's choices show Lenin in 1922 at his most humanist. A man concerned with civility and respect, for example in his piece "Elementary rules of social intercourse"; critical and impatient with the emerging bureaucracy, in "Better fewer but better"; and in defense of the tactical retreat of the Bolsheviks in the NEP, in "On Ascending a High Mountain." Lenin's concerns with education and civilization, his appreciation of the cooperative movements in the Soviet Union (state supported), his dislike of but simultaneous toleration of Proletkult, his stark intuitive feelings against Stalin, and in particular his effort to build the "Workers and Peasants Inspection" over and above the state apparatus as a sort of high court cum ombudsman against the bureaucracy, they all underline that the liberal idol of Lenin as a power hungry autocrat and an authoritarian,

even totalitarian thinker, was always already a vengeful distortion. His short, clear, elegant, and incisive sentences in these texts, the carefully chosen vernacular as he speaks with concern and respect to a whole revolutionary nation, cannot leave any other impression. From Lenin to Stalin? Some powerful factors had to intervene.

Such a factor was not the disbanding of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918, according to Paul Le Blanc's splendid and comprehensive "October Song" (Haymarket Books, 2017). Liberals have made a lot of the dispersing of the Constituent Assembly: the ultimate proof, if ever there needed to be one, that Lenin and Trotsky were anything but democrats. In the liberal account, the act fortified single party rule and was therefore a crucial condition of possibility for Stalinism. But Le Blanc is not impressed and stays with Lenin: the elections for the assembly had been held well before October and had been organized under the authority of the February Duma. Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries had not internally split up yet between a Left and a Right faction. It had therefore been unclear to voters whom they were actually electing. Crucially, with its majority of Right-wing social revolutionaries from rural constituencies, often gentry, landowners, or Tsarist officials, the Constituent Assembly would have cut down the constitutional role of the Soviets and would have sought to place a basically liberal parliamentary constitution over and on top of them. It would have erased the outcome of October and sent the country back to February. It would have solved nothing.

This was not the beginning of single party rule. The Left Social Revolutionaries had been given a substantial role in governmental committees. The Bolsheviks, an urban proletarian party in a massive rural country, were keenly aware that they entirely depended on a sustained alliance with the peasantry—Trotsky's and Lenin's prior written work had been about exactly that alliance, *pace* McMeekin. The coalition appeared to be working well, with some of the Left Social Revolutionaries, such as Spiridinova, quickly becoming influential.

But the alliance was not given the time. Brest-Litovsk, in March, all but destroyed it. Hindenburg had imposed a crushing peace, demanding huge stretches of Ukraine's valuable agricultural territory. He sought to cut down European Russia to a mere rump state. Ukraine was a base for the Left Social Revolutionaries. And it was the ultimate grain basin for the Russian cities (also vital for the German ones, as Keynes showed in his critique on Versailles (1919/2007); the confrontation over Ukraine was no surprise). German aggression destroyed the emerging revolutionary alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry. Trotsky had theatrically refused to sign the dictated peace, exposing German militarism for what it was, and calling for a German revolutionary answer to the Kaiser—but the hope for German revolution was not coming. Nor, in the end, did the Bolsheviks actually sign the *Diktat*, despite Lenin's urging. But already in April, with the Germans moving in, Social Revolutionaries and anarchists resorted to their old tactics of terrorism. They began killing Bolshevik officials. At once, rumor, suspicion, and paranoia were rife in the cities. In the same days the Allies landed in Archangelsk. They cut off Russia from the international food supplies on which it depended and began paying Tsarist officers to build the three White armies in the Baltics, the South, and the East. In a matter of weeks, a surprisingly non-violent democratic socialist revolution demanding world peace that had allowed its opponents—the Tsar, politicians, aristocrats, Tsarist officers, the Grande Bourgeoisie, the press—to walk and talk freely, was descending fast into terror and civil war. By August, even before he himself was severely wounded from an assassination attempt, Lenin was talking Red Terror, the Tcheka had been given free reign, and Trotsky was organizing the Red Army.

Despite the Bolshevik habit of understanding their own revolution in the light of its French historical precursor, no one in Bolshevism had seriously thought about the moment of "*levée*

en masse” and terror. But now a competitive violent escalation among multiple and partly invisible internal and external mortal enemies was at once on. October had been a thoroughly anti-militarist revolution, in its very basic categories, in its ontology. Le Blanc argues, coherently and against the liberal choir, that the Bolsheviks should have been much better prepared for violence. Right from the start. They had been pacifist dreamers.

The civil war was atrocious and cut-throat. This in itself led to a brutalization of human standards, as Lenin deplored in 1922, suggesting that war and civil war had magnified the lack of civility that had been common to life in the vast, poor, feudal lands of the Tsarist police state. But Le Blanc keeps his eye rightly on three structural contradictions that were playing themselves out and that the Bolsheviks inevitably had to confront. The relationship of the regime to the peasantry was the core one. It would decide whether socialism would be given a chance to live or not. The politics of the peasantry would ultimately decide the course of the civil war, as Trotsky in particular was acutely aware of.

What the Bolsheviks did not know was that even in the first years of the war, Russian food production had already been severely insufficient to feed the nation. The Tsar had been able to avert famine and keep up the armies only by having the allies sent substantial quantities of grain. That supply was now halted. The revolution moreover had placed peasant families, and in practice often the old peasant communes, in control of the land. The revolutionary state was facing a collapsing industrial economy and had no money to pay peasants market prices for surplus grain—industrial output in 1920 was less than 20% of 1913. Already in August 1918, the food supply to the cities was under threat. Grain requisitioning now became, inevitably, next to military self-defense, the key state function. Once more, this was something that, with this urgency, no Bolshevik had thought about before. The result was panic. In the dead-or-alive context of the civil war, the war on the communes became a devastating second front, ultimately costing more than a million communist activists and three million peasants their lives.

Le Blanc sides with Trotsky’s judgment: the peasants would join with the Red Army against the Whites in order to protect their newly won land from the returning landlords, but would turn against the communist grain requisitions as soon as the White threat was expelled. By the fall of 1920, as the Red Army, now with 3 million people under arms (only 10% in fact armed), appeared victorious against the White armies, fast-proliferating peasant rebellions forced the Bolsheviks in early 1921 to radically change course. The mutual slaughter of the Tambov Rebellion and the Kronstadt rising, the first led by Left social revolutionaries, the second by anarchists, forced the Bolsheviks to back down and declare the NEP. Le Blanc follows on Trotsky’s compass again: without the NEP, the Soviet state would have been overthrown by internal rebellion.

Le Blanc takes appropriate time to discuss the debates on the peasantry in classic Marxism, comparing Kautsky’s and Lenin’s classics of the 1890s with Suchanov’s and in particular Chayanov’s 1920s studies (supported by Lenin). These are interesting pages for anthropologists of peasantries, encapsulating many of the later debates in peasant studies. Le Blanc ultimately weighs in in favor of Chayanov’s (and Theodore Shanin’s) populist socialism. Lenin was right that the countryside even in 1890 was thoroughly penetrated by capitalism. But he overestimated the actual social polarization among the peasantry. This conceptual error, an urban projection, did feed into anti-Kulak obsessions when few such kulaks could be found. The Marxists ignored the growing evidence that peasants were *not* becoming either capitalists or proletarians. Viable family farms, controlling their land and employing mainly family labor, were what most peasant households were striving for, allocating kinship-labor towards that end

(including urban incomes, migration, etc.). With Shanin and Moshe Lewin, building on Chayanov, Suchanov, and many other works from the 1920s, Le Blanc believes that a mixed family farm/cooperative market-oriented socialist agriculture should have been a viable possibility for the Soviet Union. His book stops in 1924, but his implication is clear: though Leninist class categories did not help the peasant debate, there was enough research and vision available in the Soviet Union to make a non-Stalinist solution to the peasant question perfectly possible. This was being advocated by Bucharin in the mid-1920s. Trotsky did not disagree on that basic point, though warned against the political consequences for the Soviet state of too loose a market-based policy. Lenin and Trotsky had always envisioned a slow transformation towards cooperativism and collectives, with electrification, tractors, and chemical fertilizers as the first state offered incentives. Of course, one cannot but make the point that if this gradualist democratic-socialist path had actually been secured, the Soviet Union might well have succumbed to the Nazis in 1942, with a German Eurasian Nazi dictatorship as the outcome.

Two other contradictions that Le Blanc deals with very responsibly: soviets and democracy, and the party-state bureaucracy. As to the latter, Le Blanc aligns with the later Trotsky once again. He shows that with the economy in complete collapse by 1921, the cities heavily depopulating, and famine reigning in several regions, the state, party, and Red Army, now in an urgent post-civil war reconstruction effort, had inevitably become the only organizational resources available. After the militarization of labor advocated by Trotsky was thwarted, the bureaucracy and the party began multiplying the numbers of their workers fast, recruiting young believers in the communist building project who had never been part of the original Bolsheviks. These young party members would become the career bureaucrats of the 1920s. By 1922, they already outnumbered the surviving old Bolsheviks and would soon do so with a factor of 10 and more. Stalin, as party secretary, was positioned at the heart of this expansive and forcibly hypertrophic process. "Socialism in one country" was not just an idea and an historical inevitability after 1923. It was also an all-out political transformation that eclipsed the relevance of the old party and its intellectual culture. The working class had now become equated with the workers in the party embodied in Stalin's secretariat. Everything that Luxemburg and Trotsky had warned the Bolsheviks for in the early twentieth century—substitutionism: the party for the workers, the politburo for the party, the secretariat for the politburo—was now materializing.

Le Blanc shows that the Bolsheviks struggled to find the right intellectual categories to define what was going on. Marxist class language and the historical vicissitudes of the French revolution did not offer ready templates. A systematic critique of bureaucracy *a la* Michels emerged from within their midst only with Trotsky's notion of the "degenerated workers' state," coined in the late 1930s in Mexico. Lenin's prose from 1922 was just a sympathetic first effort to describe the basic issues, not more. This sort of moral critique of the bureaucracy was widespread. But more fundamentally—and I am not sure whether Le Blanc cracks the nut entirely—in Marxist terms, the party-state was becoming *the* relationship of production and accumulation, with exploitation and extraction integral to its functioning. Apart perhaps from Preobrazhensky, the Bolshevik intelligentsia found it hard to apply Marxism, forged in the struggle against capitalism, to a critical analysis of the emerging social relationships of "really existing socialism." The gradual narrowing of intellectual debate was only one factor behind that failure, albeit an important one.

Le Blanc, sympathetic to the revolution and seeking to preserve its memory for a new generation, urges attention to the issue of democracy and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Lenin and Trotsky did not have a very concrete idea of how Soviet democracy would work.

No parties necessary? Just a democratic representation based on voting in the Soviets? And then upward democratic delegation and representation all the way to the politburo? This was basically the vision. No sense here that the politburo might come to dominate it all, sometimes for good functional reasons of coordination. No idea here, too, of public collectivities that need to work out, explicate, and sustain their differences, even as a “loyal opposition.” A public sphere without sustained and legitimate differentiation of visions and interests? A naïve vision of democratic process for which they were rightly rebuked by Rosa Luxemburg already in 1918. Such a sphere without any organized inhabitants must inevitably be usurped by the bureaucracy. Their lack of intellectual appreciation for the importance of a dynamic and differentiated public sphere, for “political society,” also allowed them in 1922 to ban all factionalism within the party. Trotsky acknowledged the fatality of this move only when it was too late.

Not one path, then, from Lenin to Stalin. Nor a direct path from War Communism to Stalinism, with a mere tactical interlude during the NEP. Other possibilities had been feasible. In a balanced and honest way, Le Blanc does point to a whole set of empirical and analytic shortcomings in Marxist Leninist intellectual practice with respect to peasant economies, bureaucracies, and public democratic processes. The communists had not sufficiently sought to equip themselves with the cognitive tools that could have prevented the descent of revolution towards totalitarian autocratic state capitalism (these are my words)—the sort of tools developed by Luxemburg and Gramsci in the same years. This absence did not *cause* the descent, but neither did it help to prevent it. Of greater importance were the failing Western revolutions, the German army and Brest Litovsk, the foreign-supported civil war and allied food embargo, the Bolshevik’s own lack of preparedness for fast-escalating terror and war, their unpreparedness for dealing with food shortage and famine, and the combination of all this produced War Communism and Red Terror. And after the massive bloodshed of war communism, multi-party socialist democracy was not anymore a feasibility, not immediately in any case. The liberal idea of a violently imposed unrealistic “egalitarian utopia” is a tired fiction. But Le Blanc shows persuasively that the rise of Stalinism was enabled by some ongoing intellectual and strategic blind spots in the Marxism of the Bolsheviks.

Trotsky, Lenin, Mauss

Nevertheless, Leon Trotsky, in particular, seems a hidden and not-so-hidden inspiration of these recent commemorative texts. That is partly because of the sheer monumental quality of his *History of the Russian Revolution*, written in exile in 1930 (1932/2008). It is hard to imagine a serious new account that is not indebted to him. Michael Burawoy (2009) has argued that Trotsky remains superior to Theda Skocpol not only for explaining the dynamics of the Russian revolution but in laying down a methodology for analyzing social revolution in general. I imagine that Mieville, Steinberg, Ali, Zizek, and Le Blanc would readily agree. Burawoy argued that Trotsky’s methodological emphasis on fast-shifting loyalties, practices, and sentiments among people on the ground, in the streets, factories, and neighborhoods, made his approach so much more micro-sensitive, realistic, and dynamic than Skocpol’s staid structuralism. It was what ultimately drove the revolution, as all these works under review demonstrate, despite its fundamental anchoring in the deeper historical class polarization of Russian society, and indeed of Europe. Burawoy might say to the HAU circle that this is how “ethnographic theory” in action looks. Of course, Trotsky was the ultimate participant

observer of the revolutions of both 1905 and 1917, as well as their best-informed historian. His superior grasp of what moved common people, and his superb capacity, like Lenin's, to pick up, articulate, and focus their mood in his public speech acts has been proven by nothing less than history itself. Above all, perhaps, by his tumultuous unanimous election as President of the first St. Petersburg Soviet in 1905 as a young man of 26 years old. This was ethnographic theory in revolutionary action and then in revolutionary writing.

But Trotsky's ethnographic concerns with the chemistry of popular feelings and sentiments, however important, were merely one part of a decidedly more ambitious methodology, *pace* Burawoy. Le Blanc, who has an interesting and lengthy appendix explaining the continuing analytical relevance of Trotsky, seems well aware of this. Trotsky distinguished between three interactive levels of analysis: "algebraic" analysis of the covering laws of history in a particular epoch, such as class struggle and the rise of capitalism and the proletariat in the late nineteenth century; "arithmetic" analysis of the calculative reciprocal actions of organized actors within existing and situated political arenas; and the "molecular" analysis of individual and popular sentiments rightly cherished by Burawoy. Here we find almost a template for how Eric Wolf would later think about the different scales of power (Wolf 1990, and in fact applied in 1982).³ For Trotsky, analyzing world historical process required the deployment in various combinations and with feedback loops of these three perspectives simultaneously. Wolf excelled by making those basic methodological insights work. No ethnographic particularist then, Leon Trotsky, but no unilinear evolutionist either.

This methodology, what we might nowadays call multi-scalar and multi-temporal analysis, not entirely unlike Ernst Bloch's "synchronic asynchronicity," a methodology that I at some point employed under the name of "critical junctions" (Kalb 1997, 2015, 2018a; Kalb and Tak 2005; Kalb and Halmai 2011), underlay his theory of "combined and uneven development."⁴ While explicitly formulated only in 1930, Trotsky deployed the basics of this vision and method already in 1906 (1906/2007). It formed the theoretical background for his politics of "permanent revolution." This was in essence an expanded, relational class analysis, anchored into the experiences of locations outside of the classic West. The driving idea was "sociological amalgamation." We have no space here to discuss this seriously. In a nutshell, and sticking close to Trotsky's own problematic (but the idea deserves a much wider remit in the contemporary conjuncture): outside the West, bourgeoisies were weak. In Eurasia and Eastern Europe, imperial and feudal states remained dominant. Dependent peasantries still numerically prevailed. But these states were tied into the competitive capitalist webs spun by the Western core states, or, like India, already colonized by them. In order to confront "the whip of history," as Trotsky called it, they had to import Western capital, as portfolio or as fix investment, and they had to liberalize agriculture and dissolve serfdom. That meant that a feudal imperial state like Russia was by 1900 industrializing and urbanizing fast. This imported capital brought with it the most advanced forms and methods of production that

³ In several lectures, I have recently suggested that Wolf was fundamentally inspired by Trotsky without ever citing him, except an oblique reference in the Russian chapter in *Peasant Wars* (1969). Anthony Marcus tells me that he had helped in clearing Eric Wolf's book shelves at the Graduate Center, CUNY, after his retirement. I quote him verbatim: "He let me have most of his books—Trotsky, Trotsky, Trotsky, Isaac Deutscher, Ernest Mandel. So why did he never cite (them) in his ... anthropological works? In an obituary I wrote for him in 2000, I suggested that *Sons of the Shaking Earth* read like a Trotskyian doing Mexican history, though I was more polite in my language" (personal communication, email, May 8, 2018).

⁴ There is a remarkable upsurge of interest in "combined and uneven development" both in anthropology and more broadly, see for anthropology Kasmir and Gill 2016; Kalb 2018b; Kasmir and Gill 2018. More broadly, for example: Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015; Davidson 2012; Dunn and Radice 2006.

existed globally. Russia, and other late developers, did not need to go through all the earlier stages the West had had to go through. That in its turn meant that a more advanced, more spatially concentrated, and more conscious proletariat was emerging in and around St. Petersburg than had ever been known in the West. An advanced, literate, and well-organized urban proletariat was pitted against precisely the police state that needed this working class in order to survive. Hence, the radicalization of Russian society over time. Hence, also, a revolutionary St. Petersburg already in 1905 and then again well before 1917. And hence a bourgeoisie that was too weak to act within this radical dynamic. And thus no bourgeois revolution and no bourgeois democracy, despite the Western templates on offer, and despite Marx's own long-time belief in the necessity of that liberal trajectory. The bourgeoisie, Trotsky showed in 1906, would seek the protection of the state against the radicalizing proletariat and was therefore politically paralyzed. The revolution would be a proletarian one or there would be none. The proletariat had the power to do so, but in a peasant nation it required the alliance with the peasantry to keep that power. Later Trotsky sought to extend his method to understanding China and the USA. The key issue is that long before recent critical globalization theory arrived, Trotsky understood the basics of a variegated multi-scalar analysis that combined ethnographic concerns with people's evolving sentiments with a sharp analysis of the political class dynamics and their contradictory incorporation within and against an encompassing, violently dynamic global capitalist system.

This vision of historical dialectics allowed him, while in jail in 1906, to analyze the deeper structure of the events that had led to 1905, and to predict, accurately, the shape of the coming, and this time successful, second and third Russian revolutions (Trotsky 1906/2007). "The sociological amalgamation" of backwardness and forwardness perpetually produced social and place-based contradictory particularity within world social transformations. It also produced infinitely variable local/global class configurations within them, as well as different possibilities for politics, alliances, consciousness and ideology, and indeed revolution. Methodologically, his work foreshadowed the post-1989 contradictions of globalization, uneven development, hybridity, creolization, financialization, and so on. And of course the rise of China as the ultimate sociological amalgamation. It was set up to come to terms with turbulent local/global dialectics in the context of world historical transformations.

While Trotsky in retrospect excelled, this quality of analysis was also offered by Lenin and Bucharin, among others. They similarly analyzed imperialism, capital flows, and the social and political contradictions of a globalizing capitalism, local as well as a whole. The world war was no surprise for them. They well understood its basic drivers. This holistic and encompassing sense of world capitalist process and a keen perception of world historical transformations were essential for them, but so was a fine-grained and continually updated analysis of the logics of local livelihoods. All the Marxian authors were sharp on analyzing any available data and reports on the sort of work people were doing, for whom, divisions of labor, developments of wages and household incomes, migration, even regularly including gender relationships. As were of course the possibilities of political action. Look at Lenin's 1898 studies of Russian agriculture (Lenin 1987). One is still impressed by his effort at encyclopedic precision, his precise and critical use of the extensive reports of the agricultural inspectors, his ambitious effort at analysis. Or look at Trotsky's swift but brilliant characterizations of the nature of urbanizations in Russia in "Results" and in "The History," or the character of local bourgeoisies. Russian Marxism, then, excelled at precise empirical analysis, efforts at coherent identifications of the nature and direction of social change, of class and labor in particular, both urban and rural. The same was true for Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky, and for German

and Austrian social democracy in general, of course.⁵ These were not well-supported and independent academics. But their intellectual program and use of concepts and information was awe inspiring in ambition, in precision, and in spatial and temporal reach, geared to understanding the forces and directions of social transformation worldwide as well as national and local.

Compare this to the “ethnographic theory” of Marcel Mauss. Methodologically, Mauss’ academic work was hardly interested in how societies changed. Nor was it in fact ethnographic in the close-up, dynamic, way that Trotsky’s was. His was an avowedly synchronic interest, against the background perhaps of an implied evolutionism. Nor was he academically drawn to any concrete conditions under which lives were led. His writing suffers from a rather obscurantist meso-level synchronic theorizing. It was also overly methodologically nationalist and localist. No sense of encompassing world historical process, of ethnographic locations being part of wider dynamic spatial wholes, hardly a concept of contradiction, no academic interest in capitalist imperialism for example, even while such capitalist imperial contradictions were unfolding violently around him. In fact, rather, a certain ethnocentric cherishing, amid critique, of Western civilization, a rather hopeful idea that the liberal societies of France and England, which he knew best, would gradually become more integrative and allow the working classes more worthy lives. But that concrete interest was strictly separated from his academic work and relegated to his journalistic engagements. His journalism and his political work remained in style and focus very different from his academic activities, which were in a serene sense scholarly, a crucial difference with the Marxisms east of the Rhine. It is his academic work that we are called upon to celebrate.⁶ Its strength is in a certain anthropological holism, an interest in moralities, and in what some would call the “outsides” of capitalism, the domains that supposedly remain sheltered from the logic of capital and will therefore allow the nurturing of less-utilitarian and calculative modes of morality than the dominant ones, like kinship, friendship, everyday life, the commons (Graeber 2001; De Angelis 2007). His politics was about expanding that sphere gradually from below, for instance via cooperativism. Owenite labor initiatives in liberal Britain were his inspiration, or the cooperative movements in France. His critique on the Russian revolution shared the willfully misguided liberal condemnatory narrative of a “violent imposition of an egalitarian utopia from above,” coherent with his interests in morality. This was more about clashing moralities than clashing classes or colliding imperial and ideological interests. Like Durkheim, he had never liked the idea of revolution in the first place. There was in fact a certain conscious other-worldliness about Mauss’ academic thinking, analogous to his interest in “the outsides.” Compare Trotsky’s sharp analytical vision of what was happening in Europe and the world not just in the 1900s, but also in the 1920s and 1930s. His acute analytical grasp of the rise of Stalinism (belated), fascism (well before the fact), and the coming war (ditto). Mauss had no clue. He saw that the ancient rituals he had academically cherished as examples of alternative moralities were getting adopted by atavistic parties and war-seeking states. The corporatism he and his uncle had advocated, purportedly against the liberal distortions of society and morality, became a classic tool of Right-wing politics. Even the cooperatives could easily be bended towards the

⁵ I recommend a quick stroll through the early volumes of the *Zeitschrift für Sozial Politik* to get an overwhelming sense of this. For anthropologists, I would also like to point to Otto Rühle’s two volume *Illustrierte Kultur und Sittengeschichte des Proletariats* (Berlin 1930; “Illustrated Cultural History of the Proletariat”). Rühle was a close collaborator of Trotsky and Luxemburg, and an adult teacher.

⁶ Keith Hart has emphasized the importance of his journalistic writing, for which see Fournier 2006 in particular.

Right. As the 1920s and 1930s unfolded, Mauss withdrew from public life. His academic work, always progressing slowly, came to a complete standstill.

Mauss' work and life is certainly interesting. But it is quite a stretch to present him as *the* critical thinker whose holistic approach to society, morality, and the person we need against the reductive context of neoliberal capitalism and rising Right-wing revanchism. I argue instead for an honest re-appraisal of precisely the revolutionary Marxist thinking in and around the Russian revolution against which the spirit of Mauss' work so starkly reacted. We are living through world-shaking capitalist transformations not unlike those around 1900 and the early part of the twentieth century for which the Marxists had fine-tuned their visions and methods. The outcomes of these transformations are as deeply uncertain as they were then, though turbulent and violent they will certainly be. Capital, state, and class will once more be central drivers. Working through the contributions of the Russian and other Marxists is the appropriate and urgent intellectual maneuver to be made.

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