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France

A page has been turned (the formation of the NPA)

- Features - Daniel Bensaïd archive -

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We never saw the reference to Trotskyism as a way to shut ourselves off from others. For us, it was more like a polemical challenge. We accepted the Trotskyist tag in our conflict with the Stalinists – but without building a neurotic identity out of it or, conversely, downplaying the importance of this heritage.

We always rejected the simplification that generally accompanies labelling of this sort. We were opposed to reductionist orthodoxies; while we always held Trotsky's contributions in the highest regard, our political education always sought to nurture the pluralist memory and culture of the working-class movement – by including Luxemburg, Gramsci, Mariategui and Blanqui, but also Labriola, Sorel and the entirety of what Ernst Bloch called the “warm stream of Marxism”. Of course, Trotskyism holds a special place within this heritage that lacks both heirs and an instruction manual. Thanks to the struggle of the Left Opposition and then of the Fourth International against the Stalinist reaction – which cost Trotsky, Nin, Pietro Tresso and many others their lives – the communist project could not be entirely usurped by its bureaucratic impostor.

There are those who seek to put the history of the working-class movement behind us. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, has Trotskyism been deprived of its negative pole and therefore lost its very *raison d'être*? It is certainly true that present-day divisions within emancipatory movements cannot be conjugated in the past tense.

Controversies that raged until quite recently – such as the one surrounding the precise character of the Soviet Union – are no longer of any practical consequence. In this sense, a page has indeed been turned. It would be reckless, however, to argue that Stalinism has been definitively relegated to the past. Stalinism was a particular historical form of the danger of state bureaucratization that threatens emancipatory movements. Contrary to the hasty claims of some, this danger is not the natural product of “the party form” but rather of the social division of labour in modern societies – and this is something infinitely more serious. This threat will loom large for all forms of organization – whether trade-union, social-movement or party-political – as long as this social division of labour endures.

The specific historical form of Stalinism has died, but the lessons to be drawn from this experience are actually more relevant than ever. It is a matter of ensuring the development of socialist democracy at all levels. These lessons are no longer the exclusive property of organizations from the Trotskyist or council-communist libertarian tradition. They have a much wider base, and this is not something to complain about. When what I have called the “baggage of exodus” becomes a collective asset of the new anti-capitalist Left, it is a kind of posthumous victory for those so badly defeated by the Stalinist counter-revolution. The “short twentieth century” has ended and a new cycle of class struggles is just beginning. Crucial new questions are being raised, beginning with the ecological challenge. It was essential for the LCR to break from routine and take the risk of reaching beyond itself without renouncing its history. The NPA will not define itself as a Trotskyist organization. It will aim to bring together a range of experiences and currents on the basis of the events and tasks of the new period. To go the distance, though, it will need history and memory.

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