Developing Marxist theory

The Critique journal is celebrating its 50th issue. Peter Manson spoke to its editor, Hillel Ticktin

What would you say have been the achievements of Critique over its 50 issues?

What we did set out to do in 1973 was to publish a serious study of the Soviet Union. That had been sorely lacking on the left, which had not undertaken a thorough examination based on Soviet experiences and material in Russian. By having such experience to draw on and knowing very little about the detail of Soviet life, the left for the most part resorted to dogma.

You mean notions of the USSR as some kind of deformed workers’ state or an example of state capitalism?

Yes, that’s right. And we did succeed in breaking down this resistance to a more serious approach and start to encourage the left to drop its dogmas.

But, as you point out, it was an early decision that we undertook to develop Marxist theory and apply it to current circumstances more generally. Obviously one journal cannot go very far, but that was our aim and I think we achieved some modest success.

Exactly. The first issue had a print run of over 2,500 and it sold out very quickly. We subsequently increased this to 5,000. During this time we continued to focus on the Soviet Union.

When were you in the USSR yourself?

The early 60s. Although I was critical of the Soviet Union before I went there, I was nowhere near as critical of it as I became. What I saw was in fact worse than what was being described by people either on the right or left - the great difficulties of everyday life, the atomisation, the awfulness of state control that went far beyond anything in Nazi Germany. I was also surprised by the extent of anti-Semitism.

Did you have any Russian education before you went to the USSR, but I took lessons in the language during my period as a PhD student in Moscow.

How has Critique’s role evolved over the years?

Well, we began with the Soviet question and gradually changed in the direction of a more general Marxist journal. Clearly one’s understanding of the Soviet Union was a key part of that.

From the beginning, Critique organised conferences - the latest is this Saturday. Our 1973 conference attracted 500 people, with Ernst Mandel, Ralph Miliband, myself and other speakers. Those events clearly had an impact.

At first we were probably naive, I wanted to be non-sectarian and embrace all the different views on the Marxist left. So we had, for example, members of the International Socialist Workers Party, Paul Sweezy of Monthly Review and the International Communist Group on the advisory board. Mandel was also on it.

But this simply did not work. The IS wanted Critique to carry articles elaborating its state-capitalist view of the Soviet Union and was unpopular beyond that. There was also a problem with the IMG. The people on the board were fine, but they did not really agree with the leaders of their organisation. A complication was that the journal had been founded by people in the Institute of Soviet Studies, but the IMG took a different approach. It soon became clear that Critique had to be independent and even an advisory board where representatives of the groups were present was a problem.

But we were certainly on friendly terms. Mandel and I had a debate in London in 1978, I think - that went on all day. But people gradually dropped off the board and its nature changed, although Mandel remained on it.

How do you see Critique developing?

Originally the intention was for it to come out twice a year, but for a time it was nearer once a year. Now, however, it is published by Routledge and comes out quarterly.

The journal now has more space and we have a policy of publishing anything of sufficient quality within the Marxist tradition. The aim remains the same - to develop Marxist theory.

The features we have published around the question of capitalist crisis have been better than most published elsewhere. Most of what passes for ‘analysis’ in the media - and on the left - has been hopeless.

There is no real explanation as to why crises take place - apart from pointing to the bubble, which does not explain anything.

The debate over the theory of crisis does, however, show that it is possible for there to be a number of different views within Marxism. In one sense there are more viewpoints within Marxism than outside it.

Critique has always adopted themes for exploration. In the last two or three years you have personally become involved in campaigning for a Marxist party. Do you think that the question of party might be a useful theme to explore today?

To do that would we have to have writers of sufficient quality. The left is in a very poor state and is desperately in need of theory before a party can be formed. ... which is in its self a question of theory.

As I say, it is not easy to get good people to write. We could hope for the best and accept anything that comes, but I would want contributions of a high standard, which are not always easy to get. So that would be a problem.

However, it might be useful to have an issue on that question. That more or less relates to the present situation - that is to say, the situation resulting from the crisis. It is fairly obvious that more people will look to socialism, but will not know how to get it. The attitude towards capitalism has clearly changed. We know it does not work, but the present crisis has made that more obvious to many people, including those who are suffering badly as a result.

One would therefore expect a demand for change and so, yes, that puts the question of party on the agenda. That is linked to the question of crisis - a long-term one, not merely cyclical, and one that will develop more and more powerfully.

As for themes more generally, the crisis will no doubt be an ongoing one. We have one theme per year and the current one is ‘Marxism and freedom of expression’, coinciding with our 50th issue. In 2011 we are planning to revisit the question of Stalinism - it just so happens that it will be 50 years since Khrushchev removed the remains of Stalin’s body from the mausoleum in Red Square.

I was actually in Moscow in 1961 - the university department where I was based was opposite Red Square and the event created a tremendous stir at the time. I went there during the session of the 22nd Congress when Khrushchev made his speech and a whole lot of people had come to Red Square. They were milling around and actually speaking to each other about politics, which was quite different from anything that had happened for more than 40 years.

1961 was undoubtedly an important moment, and so we in Critique are using the opportunity of the anniversary to look back at the whole question of Stalinism. This is particularly pertinent, since there has been something of a revival of Stalinist nostalgia in Russia. Which says a lot about the failure of the international movement for socialism.

Yes. Hopes in both the market and for a better society have been dashed. But a residual yearning for a socialist future remains. These are some of the issues we will be discussing at our February 27 conference.

Remembering the past, rethinking the future

Saturday February 27, 12 noon to 5pm: Critique seminar, London School of Economics, room B212, second floor, Columbia House, corner of Aldwych and Houghton Street, London WC1.

Speakers: Hillel Ticktin, Mick Cox. Followed by celebration of 50th issue. Organised by Critique: critique.journal@yahoo.co.uk.

The Critique journal is also celebrating its 50th issue. Peter Manson spoke to its editor, Hillel Ticktin.
In defence of Leon Trotsky


Bob Service’s book on Leon Trotsky has been very widely reviewed by left and right. Perhaps one of the best reviews is by Paul Le Blanc (‘Second assassination of Trotsky’s Links’ - International Journal of Socialism’ – http://links.org/au/node/1440). He makes much of the fact that this is a comprehensive, copious and competent overview: that the book has a scholarly apparatus, with many points that are useful and some that are new; that there is an element of sloppiness in a number of the assertions; and that Service appears to be driven by a political agenda, which is not dissimilar to that of the research institution where he did much of his work for this volume - the Hoover Institution, known for the right wing views of its scholars.

Le Blanc deals with some of the assertions made over the radio and television: that this is the first full-scale biography of Trotsky, not written by a Trotskyist. That the Russian, Volko Kanogan, had written a critical biography some 10 years ago is well known, but Service excludes Russians in his written account of his Trotskyism, though not when interviewed on Radio 4 in the UK. It is obvious nonsense and Le Blanc quotes the examples of Payne, Sengel and Carmichael.

The book flows easily and keeps the attention of the reader. The reasons, however, are only partly to his credit. Clearly, it is a biography of Trotsky’s life. It has a scholarly form, but is not scholarly, whatever else it might be. Service makes assertion after assertion as to Trotsky’s motivations, Trotsky’s originality, his intellectual competence (not to speak of his ability as a lover) – all with sufficient reference or argumentation.

His fundamental thesis is stated at the beginning: that Trotsky belongs, along with Hitler and Stalin, among the great killers of all time. Trotsky is a warmonger, anti-liberal opponent. Secondly, he asserts that Trotsky’s history is not a simple case of a cool head and a warm heart, but a poseur, and an arrogant, cold, world-beader.

His own description of Trotsky’s history fails to support these theses. He shows how Trotsky turned Lenin’s offer to be prime minister, and various other prominent roles, and only reluctantly became the commissar for war. However, the section of the book which is without the constant side remarks and which breaks with the popular Stalinist portrayal of Trotsky, as playing no role, is the section on the civil war, where Service makes clear in some detail that Trotsky built up the Red Army and was pivotal in its eventual victory. He makes even clearer Trotsky’s bravery and his military prowess, citing his importance to the defence of Petrograd.

Perpetuating anti-communist myths

Another argument is that Trotsky was part of Bolshevik brutality and terrorism. He points to the fact that Trotsky did not condemn Lenin’s arbitrary executions in Petrograd. Given that this had blood been on his hands, there is every reason to believe that Stalin might have disbelieved his version, and that therefore he caused a crucial breach at a time when the Bolshevik situation was desperate. While this is only supposition, we cannot lay Stalin’s actions at Trotsky’s feet quite so simply. More serious is Service’s use of Trotsky’s defence of terrorism in Terrorism or counterterrorism.

Any scholar reading Trotsky’s chapter on terror in that book can recognize that the use of the word ‘terror’ is not the same as its use today, referring to such terrorist groups as the IRA or al-Qaeda. In the introduction to that book, Trotsky explicitly condemns terror of the latter kind. He had done much such earlier, referring to anarchist groups. Trotsky is using ‘terror’ in the relevant chapter, in the sense of the Russian word ushash, which refers to fear and horror in the first instance. He is arguing that during a period of war, particularly a brutal civil war, fear is a necessary component. He is also saying that since war is war, people are killed and executed, particularly when the regime itself is at stake, and that the whites were particularly brutal themselves.

This cannot be gainsaid. Seventy thousand Jews, alone, were killed in pogroms instigated by the whites. White terror after the Paris Commune, and after 1905 showed what the alternative was. Since then we have witnessed the extreme brutality of the right, and the extreme right in many instances - of which, in the post-war period, Greece, Argentina, Chile and, in the case of the British empire, Kenya are good instances. The brutality of the right does not justify the left doing the same and one may hope that it will never happen again. That does not deal with the question, however.

The question that Trotsky posed was whether a war can be conducted as a social war, in which terrorism replaces hierarchy, and fear and persuasion take the place of imprisonment and execution. To ask the question is to get the answer. Within capitalism, war is war and socialists can only modify its nature to a very limited degree. At that time, World War I was conducted under the tried and tested rules, which involved shooting deserters, instilling fear into subordinates and into the enemy. Trotsky accepted these rules as the only ones likely to be successful. No one calls this terrorism, though later generations might well do so.

In short, Bob Service has regurgitated the standard critique of Trotsky, which he has every right to do, but without the necessary scholarly discussion of the issue. Whatever one thinks of the issue itself, Service has totally failed to substantiate his argument that Trotsky was in the same league as Stalin and Hitler. Trotsky did not directly or indirectly order the killings of masses of people, although he did sanction executions and imprison. Had he or the Bolsheviks been of that mind, they would have lost the civil war itself.

Historical periods when millions were killed, as under Stalin, were not induced just by one mad man, however brutal and powerful, but by the instability and irrationality of the system itself. Seven million died in the civil war, but one cannot attribute any substantial number to Trotsky himself, though one can point out that without external intervention a fraction of that number would have died.

The Bolsheviks won the civil war, to a considerable extent due to Trotsky’s conduct of it, but the destruction, the massive loss of revolutionary personnel, combined with the exhaustion and inevitable disillusionment, effectively provided the basis of the subsequent Stalinist counter-revolution. The first stages of moving towards socialism will always be difficult, but the conduct of a war using capitalist forms of hierarchy both for the army and for the population, in war communism, could only demoralise the population. This is why the left opposition of the time - the military and workers’ oppositions - were resistant in demanding change.

Ever since the issue has remained open. It is hard to see that Lenin and Trotsky were wrong in that the alternative would have been a repetition of the Paris Commune with its attendant horrific destruction by the right. They took a chance and changed the world. The success of the Russian Revolution, with all its defects, altered the world forever, and it entered a long-drawn-out and bloody transition process. Service, of course, cannot see this, this book is perhaps a bit too plump, bereft of ideas, but replete with snide remarks.

Intellectual

Another argument is that this book is Hamlet without the prince. It tries to go through Trotsky’s life on a number of planes, most particularly his personal life. There is even a chapter on his musical affairs, including a1nimate quote from a letter from Trotsky to his wife on that subject. As with every other aspect of Trotsky, Service discovers him to be self-centred in love too. While this might be salacious and draw people to read the book, it is irrelevant to understanding the man.

This is partly because Trotsky was an intellectual, who made crucial contributions to Marxism and to communism, because Trotsky became the living embodiment of the Russian Revolution itself. Trotsky was not only an economist, but he understood a particular action, Servic- ing a specific action, with a specific understanding.

The book is not as an intellectual, who changes its interpretation. If he had done the reverse and always cast Trotsky’s actions in a positive light, he could have been accused of being an acolyte or a hagiographer. The point is that any scholar who reads Trotsky’s writings and interpretations in order to consider Trotsky is not the purpose of the book.

In this connection, Service discovers that Trotsky was not an intellectual - or at least he was not in the least original and so there is no need to discuss his ideas, as there are none to discuss. If Service were himself a better writer, intellectual, there could be debate, but he quite evidently understands as much about Marxism as William Shanklin or Martin Amis. Marxism is not easy to grasp, particularly at the present time, and for some one who is not a reader of Trotsky’s writings and interpretations in order to consider Trotsky, it is probably impossible to understand its significance. Service has not even attempted to explain to the reader why a person could not appreciate the development of Marxist thought. Unfortunately Service tries to tackle the issue by talking of Trotsky, philosophy and Sidney Hook, and of James Burnham and Max Shachtman, without giving the substance of the argument. It is as if Service thought that Trotsky had written on Marxist philosophy a number of times in his life plus Trotskyism.

However, Marxism is above all a made of political-economic analysis, used as a means of understanding the world, the better to change it. In this light, Trotsky’s contributions were seminal. Amazingly, Service reduces the concept and theory of permanent revolution to the simple idea that the workers would take power in Russia, and in general, to the policy between 1848, that the revolution became permanent only when the working class took power. Anarchists have always said that Marx put it in capital but not of capitalism. (One should note that Service’s book is written about the revolution, not the collectivity, the class, and not the industrial movement.) There is one permanent and persistent force destabilising the society, the result of which is to lead to different kinds of upheavals and to different classes trying to take power, but only when the working class takes power does the society stabilise itself. This is arguing that the political econom-
ic structure of the society is leading to revolution and that the working class must lead it. Trotsky took this concept and applied it specifically to capitalism but without the political forms of capitalism and argued that there was nothing else that could lead to a new society, except the working class. The bourgeoisie were no longer pre- pared to fight the working class. Marx and Engels had got halfway there when they spoke of the German bourgeoisie and the English for a fight for a better world. The bourgeoisie were afraid that they would lose the tithe of social revolution and consequently they preferred to keep what power they had.

At one level, the background of the personnel who took power in the name of the working class was irrelevant (ie, they could be soldiers, or of peasant extraction), as long as they acted in the interest of the class. Similarly, in the English Revolution the class origin of the individuals in the Long Parliament was irrelevant to the class forces that they represented. Trotsky made the point: 'The difference between the conception before 1917, Because Lenin underestimated the necessary con- war and the one after 1994 was not a short-termism of the peasantry. Trotsky-Smith. Trotsky knew that, because permanent revolution was not an empiricist notion, but an idea of permanent revolution, which Trotsky had never, but the introduction of capitalism, which Trotsky had never, had made his own, only by 1917. It was, therefore, not surprising that Lenin argued that Trotsky against his earlier self.

The permanent revolution applies to the period after 1917-22, in that Trotsky made his own predictions about the revolutions. He argued that the social democratic betrayal of 1918-19 opened up the possibility for a revolution against capitalism and socialism. He compares the present to the times of Machavelli. Second, he argues that 1918 was a counterrevolution in the Sovi- et Union and a class taking power. Underlying all this, the dynamic of a new society is the development of the working class and the medium of the working class remains. The rejection of the exploited goes unheard. The bourgeoisie was not itself openly, and finds new ways of unlimited exploitation. The bourgeoisie was not itself living in a period of ever-present revolution, the world over. For Trotsky, this was the bourgeois revolution and therefore global - he argued that the revolution in permanence was itself global.

Others have pointed to Trotsky's conception of the building of socialism as a contribution to the understanding of the phenomenon. It is obvious that he was not arguing for a step-by-step or linear process, as if it were straightforward to stem the tide from its source to its end, and to train the socialist forces to make this revolution. The issue is much more complex than this. Trotsky was engaged in a series of polemics with Stalin and Trotsky. Service tried to argue that Trotsky was not a politician and that Trotsky was a theoretician. Trotsky denied that he had any political authority. He was not a theoretician. Trotsky himself, however, wrote that he had not the time to argue this point. Trotsky was not himself a theoretician.