

On the Organisation of Defeats

Agon Hamza & Gabriel Tupinambá

Abstract:

The present contribution seeks to provide an Althusserian analysis of the most common narrative concerning Stalinism, the one proposed by Trotsky. A Marxist investigation of this narrative must, on the one hand, allow us to reconstruct the soviet disaster from a historical and conceptual standpoint and, on the other, clarify the political and ideological usefulness of the narrative that has otherwise established itself in place of a real analysis.

Keywords:

Althusser, Stalin, Trotsky, deviation

“In the inaugural manifesto of the 1st International, Marx invited the workers to “become acquainted with the mysteries of international politics”. He didn’t suspect that the hard thing for Marxists, later on, would be to become acquainted with the mysteries of their own organization.” (Claudín, 1970)

“Because one day we really shall have to try and call things by their *name*, and to do that, as Marxists, we have to look for that *name* ; I mean the right *concept* (even if we have to do it while we advance), so that we can come to understand our own history.” (Althusser, 1976)

When writing a text on Joseph Stalin one usually feels the need to add prefatory remarks distinguishing such a venture from any sort of appreciation or affirmation of the horrors that took place under the Stalinist regime. The present text, however, is not so much a text on Joseph Stalin - the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Soviet Union, from the twenties until his death - as a text on this elusive instance to whom we address ourselves in an attempt to mark our distance from the Stalinist heritage. What is the extent of its reach and effects? Could this implicit reference serve a particular purpose, given that the demand to differentiate ourselves seems so forceful, sometimes much more so than the concrete requirements of the critical practices we are primarily concerned with?

A focus on the political sequence of Stalinism would require mostly a historical and comparative analysis of the period, seeking to render intelligible the political logic embedded in such a complex historical conjuncture. The path we have chosen, however, departs from an obscure logic, a certain invariant reference we cannot get rid of, in order to *arrive* at history. Rather than ask “what has taken place?”, we ask “what is this instance, which never ceasing *not to take place*, somehow accompanies us until today?”.

In his essential *On Marx and Freud*, Louis Althusser talks about how the communist and Marxist movement is constantly involved in a fourfold process of “attack-annexation-revision-split” which turns its conflicting character into an ever-present reason to dissolve and fragment its institutions and fronts of struggle:

“The entire history of Marxism has verified and continues to verify every day the necessarily conflictual character of the science founded by Marx. Marxist theory, “true” and therefore dangerous, rapidly became one of the vital objectives of the bourgeois class’ struggle. We see the dialectic referred to earlier at work: attack-annexation-revision-split; we see the attack directed from the outside pass into the interior of theory which thus finds itself invested with revisionism. In response there is the counterattack and, in certain limited situations, splits (Lenin against the Second International). It is through this implacable and inescapable dialectic of an irreconcilable struggle that Marxist theory advances and is strengthened before encountering grave, always conflictual crises.”¹

We should oppose Althusser’s vision of Marxism as a “conflictual science,” forever ridden with contradictions, to Leon Trotsky’s famous characterization of Stalin and the impasses of the Third International, in his *The Third International After Lenin* (1929):

“The results in the changes in political orientation and of the dirigent cadres are well known. Since early 1923 the Communist International has not arrived at anything other than defeats: in Germany, in Bulgaria, in England and in China. In other countries the defeats have not been so dramatic, but they are also grave. In all these cases, the immediate cause has been the opportunistic blindness of the directing body. What is left to say is that the gravest of defeats is the one Stalin prepares inside the Soviet Republic: it seems that he is bent on going down in history as the great organizer of defeats”²

The main difference between these two ways to think *the organization of defeats* in Marxist politics is quite clear. While Trotsky talks about the “immediate cause” being a problem of essentially teleological nature - the political orientation of the nomenklatura, Stalin specially - Althusser locates the source of the incessant splits and failures of communism in the very structure of its field: it is a field forever haunted by the effects of *being embedded within its own object of intervention*. Marxism is a conflictual science, in constant polemics

1 Althusser 1991, p.20

2 Trotsky 2001, p.6

with itself, threatened by “opportunisms” and different deviations, not because of the particular character of some of its members (though certain character traits might find “shelter” in aspects of this structure), but because of the paradoxical properties of the very set or collective they form - communist politics struggles against ideological forms from which it cannot itself claim to be fully separated. The set of “all communists” is the set of all of those who break away from ideological identification, but that also means breaking away from any reliance of being identified as a set. Such a paradoxical or conflictual form remained, at least until Althusser’s intervention, practically unnamed - and that which has no name, psychoanalysis reminds us, returns in the real, in the guise of repetition. In the case of the communist movement, it returns in the form of splits which aim to purge the collective from those who do not belong to it - a potentially infinite task, since “not belonging to a set” is one of the distinctive traits of being a communist.

Trotsky’s political diagnosis - that the crisis in the communist movement stemmed specially from the bad or corrupted decisions of its vanguard - in fact does not contradict Althusser’s position, but rather gains a new light when considered from the standpoint of this structural tension: “to organize a defeat” might not simply mean, as Trotsky intended, to lead us towards a political failure through opportunistic decision-making - it could also mean that Stalin retroactively allowed us to make sense of the otherwise traumatic and dispersed history of our failures, by giving a non-structural cause to what is rather a structural impasse of the communist movement. In this sense, “to organize a defeat” means to organize the consequences of defeat, its collective re-inscription - that is, the symbolic means which might allow us to mourn and work through a defeat, and ultimately to learn how to fail better.

Until today, the crisis in the communist movement has been mostly organized by two compatible treatments of its defeats: either the catastrophic consequences of the socialist experiments in the twentieth century signal to an *absolute* failure, which can only be responsibly answered by letting go of its founding hypotheses altogether, since the failure is structurally dependent on these political assumptions, or they signal to an *absolutist* failure at the hands of some of its leaders, unwilling or incapable of directing the movement towards its still valid and sound destination. The main question, when one adopts the second position, becomes that of recuperating an original and pure impulse, and of finding ways to protect it from corrupting influences. We have called this the “absolutist” alternative because, in order to assign responsibility for a structural impasse to a non-structural actor, we must also ascribe to this actor a quasi-transcendental role. And so it is that Stalin - not the historical figure, truly the frontman of one of the greatest disasters of

human history, but the name evoked to explain the cause of the horrors that followed the Soviet dream - acquires the role of a *clinamen* in the history of communist experimentation, as if his political intervention had the power to make history “swerve” and take an unexpected turn towards the demise of the early Soviet project. But the absolutist theory of failure does not only requires us to endow a placeholder with the qualities of the place it occupies, it also has the secondary effect of *endowing the place itself with the characteristics of the placeholder*, since the proper name becomes the only symbolic marker for the structural impasse is sutures, and so we become incapable of distinguishing, for example, the history of leaders from the structural traits of leadership - comfortably assuming that leaders are always proto-tyrannical (so that, when they are not tyrannical, they simply are not considered leaders).

It is this secondary effect, through which a certain otherness gets personified, that truly explains the porosity of most militant circles to a certain ideological use of Trotsky's take of the failures of Stalinism.

But how does one approach the critique of Stalinism in the epoch which is experiencing a revival in the studies of Stalin and the Soviet Union? What is the crux of the subject matter, its continuous source of fascination? In his almost half forgotten short essay *Note on “The Critique of the Personality Cult,”* Louis Althusser gives a very important analysis of what is wrong with the previous treatments of Stalin's USSR:

The term ‘Stalinism’, which the Soviet leaders have avoided using, but which was widely used by bourgeois ideologians and the Trotskyists, before penetrating into Communist circles, offers in general the same “disadvantages” as the term “personality cult”. It designates a *reality* which innumerable Communists, above all, have experienced, either in direct and tragic form, or less directly and with more or less serious consequences. Now this terminology also has theoretical pretensions: among bourgeois ideologists and many Trotskyists. It *explains* nothing. To set out on the road of a Marxist explanation, to be able to pose the problem of the explanation of these facts, the least that is required is to put forward *Marxist concepts*, and to see whether they are suitable. That is why I am proposing the concept of “*deviation*”, which is a concept that can certainly be “found” in Marxist-Leninist theory. Thus one might, first of all, talk of a “*Stalinian*” *deviation*: first of all, because to talk of a deviation necessarily requires that it should next be *qualified*, that one should explain *in what* it consisted, and always in Marxist terms. One thing, at the present stage, must be made clear: to speak of a “Stalinian” deviation is not to explain it by an individual, who would be its “cause”. The adjective certainly refers to a man in history, but above all to a

certain *period* in the history of the International Labour Movement.³

With this thesis, Althusser in fact opens up the field for the analysis of what from now on, we shall refer to as the *Stalinist deviation*. In the history of Marxism, there is a well-known tension between what Althusser calls “concepts” and “pseudo-concepts.” Very often we tend to analyse our own history through – due to the lack of a Marxist analysis – pseudo-concepts. As a consequence, the way we pose the problem is constitutive part of the problem we seek to analyse. The same holds for our predominant analysis on Stalinism: all the adjectives that are used to explain his rule (horrors, terror, violence) do not shed light on what is crucial for a Marxist analysis: it doesn't say anything about “their conditions, of their causes, in short of their *internal* determination, and therefore of their forms.”⁴ In the Marxist literature, we rarely encounter such analysis, that is capable of bringing forth the contradiction in the heart of the constitution of the twentieth century socialism which gave rise to Stalinist and other deviations.

Let us therefore approach this topic from the standpoint of Marxism. The clearest of contradictions appear when a philosophical, theoretical, or political orientation is in a crisis, is when its own edifice is incapable of accounting for the new developments on its outside but with which the discipline is conditioned, i.e. what to make of the new scientific breakthroughs, how to properly understand the intensity and the structure of social dynamics, or what is the determining instance in the current political struggles, et cetera. When faced with its own deadlocks, the attempts are focused on changing or supplementing it with elements from within the general framework, from its own ‘ground,’ as it were. In contemporary Marxist theory and Leftist politics in general, this tendency is best exemplified in the proposals for diagnosing our situation: neoliberalism, Empire, postmodern capitalism, and so on – and are precise examples of what Slavoj Žižek calls *Ptolemization* of a theory.⁵ Or, as Marx put it, when it calls up “the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present a new scene of world history.”⁶

The passage quoted from Althusser gives us the perspective of our analysis of the narratives on Stalinist deviation: 1) the cult of personality, and 2) Trotskyist narrative, for which Althusser provided the proper

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3 Altusser 2008, p.118n3
4 ibid., p.117
5 Žižek 2008, p.ix
6 Marx 2005, p.63

conceptual framework.

The notion of cult of personality is clearly not a Marxist concept. Even Stalin knew to remain distant from this fetishistic adoration. In his memoirs, the Bulgarian communist leader Georgi Dimitrov, who was also the head of the Communist International (1934-1943), reports on one occasion in 1937 when he proposed a toast to Stalin, he rejected it:

Stalin: I respect Comrade Dimitrov very much. We are friends and will remain friends. But I must disagree with him. He has even expressed himself here in an un-Marxist fashion. What the victory of the cause requires is the correct conditions, and then the leaders will always be found. It is not enough merely to point out the true path. The English party, after all, has what we consider the correct policy, but it can accomplish nothing because the middle cadres are on the side of the Labourites. The French party is carrying out the correct policy, but the Socialist Party is nevertheless very strong. The fundamental thing is the middle cadres. That must be noted, and it must never be forgotten that other conditions being equal, the middle cadres decide the outcome of our cause.⁷

For Stalin, the middle cadres decide everything.⁸ They were the people linked with the masses, low-ranked officers, et cetera. Stalin even explains his victory over Trotsky through this formula:

The main thing is the middle cadres. Generals can do nothing without a good officer corps. Why did we prevail over Trotsky and the rest? Trotsky, as we know, was the most popular man in our country after Lenin. Bukharin, Zinoviev, Rykov, Tomsky¹⁵¹ were all popular. We were little known, I myself, Molotov, Vor[oshilov], and Kalinin, then. We were fieldworkers in Lenin's time, his colleagues. But the middle cadres supported us, explained our positions to the masses. Meanwhile Trotsky completely ignored those cadres.⁹

Stalin downplays the role of the leader, "the ones who choose the leader, explain our positions to the masses, and ensure the success of our cause. They don't try to climb above their station; you don't even notice them."¹⁰ Following this, a reference to Althusser can shed light to the crucial point which the 'cult of personality' misses in its critique:

7 Dimitrov 2003, pp.66-67. To this, Khrushchev's nodded with the usual opportunism: Khrushchev: What we have is a felicitous combination—both the great leader and the middle cadres!

8 Stalin 1935

9 Dimitrov 2003, p.66

10 ibid, p.65

For Marxism the explanation of any phenomenon is in the last instance *internal*: it is the *internal* "contradiction" which is the "motor". The external circumstances are active: but "through" the internal contradiction which they overdetermine. Why the need to be precise on this question? Because certain Communists, finding the "explanation" in terms of the "cult" inadequate, thought of the idea of adding a *supplement*, which could only be *external*: for example, the explanation by capitalist encirclement, whose reality no one can deny. Marxism, however, does not like supplements: when you need a supplement too much, you have probably missed the *internal* cause.¹¹

How should we understand this? Stalin was in power before Lenin died. He was appointed the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from April 1922,¹² thus being "the only person simultaneously in the politburo, orgburo, and secretariat."¹³ By being the General Secretary of the Party, he had exceptional power. And a crucial point has to be made here. The Communist Party in the Soviet Union was *not* the same as the Government. The Party was not an executive committee, but it was a mass organisation which "deliberately intended to shadow all other institutions."¹⁴ However, the Party was not a state organ, but a voluntary public organisation. This is why all the decisions of the Party had to be "formulated as decrees of the Council of People's Commissars."¹⁵ Trotsky's famous saying that "Stalin did not create the apparatus. The apparatus created him" is (even) factually wrong: what it misses is the double role of Stalin as both dedicated to the consolidation of the apparatus' structure - which in fact means the consolidation of the middle cadres as central figures - and as the occupant of the place created by the autonomous working of this very structure. As Althusser puts it, there is a conceptual analysis here precisely because this perspective allows us to *split Stalin into two*. Stalin participated in the creation of the party apparatus and it was through it that he got to power and remained in power.

In his autobiography, Trotsky argues that

At this tenth congress, on Zinoviev's initiative and quite against

11 Althusser 2008, pp.117-118

12 Kotkin 2014, p.424

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., p.425

15 Trotsky 1970, p.467. He also claims that "Stalin generally gave his support to people who existed politically only through the grace of the government apparatus", ibid. p.448

Lenin's will, Stalin was put forward as a candidate for the post of the general secretary of the party. The Congress believed that he had the backing of the entire Central Committee. But no one attached much importance to this appointment. Under Lenin the post of general secretary, established by the tenth congress, could have only a technical character, never political. Yet Lenin had his fears. "This cook will make only peppery dishes," he would say of Stalin. That was why Lenin, at one of the first meetings of the Central Committee after the congress, insisted on emphasizing "Trotsky's loyalty"; it was a thrust at a subterranean intrigue.¹⁶

Here the inner logic of the narrative of Stalinism as moral corruption starts to appear. First of all, the position of the General Secretary could never have had solely a "technical character": it was above all an administrative function, but who could assert that the consolidation of order in the Soviet Union in the late twenties was not itself a political fact? The split between "technical" and "political" in this passage anticipates the *indistinction* between moral and political actions, since the real that truly can distinguish itself from the technical or administrative is rather that of morality, in the sense of the realm of conducts based on free will, not previous institutional constraints. An Althusserian path, on the other hand, would have been to assert the primacy of class struggle with respect to the critique of ideology, and the retracing from the standpoint of the effects, rather than depart from always-already intelligible causes¹⁷ - which also means bracketing the problem of moral agency as a fundamental category. Sociological, cultural, or psychological analysis are not only insufficient, but in themselves ideological. Far from providing an objective analysis of the situation, their contribution to the ideological-political struggle is predominantly mystificatory. This leads us inevitably to what is perhaps one of the most crucial aspects of Althusser's oeuvre: taking sides and drawing lines of demarcation. In a letter to Macciocchi, commenting on electoral campaign, drawing from Mao's *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People*, he says:

An electoral campaign can be a first (limited but real) step towards understanding what is happening among 'the people'. A campaign also provides a means of responding to the preliminary but absolutely essential question for every political undertaking: *What does 'the People' mean, today, in Italy?* Another way of putting it might be: What classes make up 'the people'? What fractions of classes are involved *beyond* the

16 Trotsky 1970, p.467. He also claims that "Stalin generally gave his support to people who existed politically only through the grace of the government apparatus", *ibid.* p.448

17 Pêcheux 2015, pp.1-2

proletariat the poor peasants?¹⁸

And right away he concludes that:

As long as you can't answer the question: what, today, comprises the people in a given country (*today*, because the composition of the people varies historically; *in a given country*, because the composition of the people changed from place to place), you can't do anything in politics. Only by knowing what 'the people' means can you then develop: (1) a mass political line; (2) corresponding political actions¹⁹

In her classic *The Cultural Front*, Sheila Fitzpatrick talks about the 'middle class,' to whom she also refers to as 'the new elite.' This is the class of the experts, created by Stalin's 'revolution from above.' This is the class which was educated by Stalin.²⁰ The period of the Cultural Revolution ended in 1932 – an important date in marking the "betrayed revolution," according to Trotsky. Both Trotsky and Fitzpatrick analyse Stalin's rule as a period which marked the return to the traditional Russian values: the end of the sexual revolution, homosexuality was banned, the artistic creation was limited and confined within the coordinates of the regime. Fitzpatrick, among many others, reads this as the return to tradition. Stalinism is often perceived as the restoration, as the Thermidorian sequence. The hypothesis we want to propose is the following: instead of designating Stalinism as the Thermidor of the October Revolution, we argue that the end of the 'cultural revolution' was seen as a way of preventing the students and others to *further* divide themselves from the masses. The Russian masses, in the 1920s, were evidently more culturally conservative than the urban revolutionaries of their time.²¹ In this sense, Stalin would have tried to take communism *seriously*, in the sense of trying to avoid the lagging behind of the masses, rather than equating possible communism with an empty slogan of a TV commercial in which 'everything goes.' This polemic process exemplifies what bureaucracy truly meant for Stalin: "bureaucratism means holding to established rules, routines, not thinking independently while contributing nothing new that might be dictated by changed

18 Althusser 1973, p.5

19 *Ibid*

20 Fitzpatrick 1992. Further "she claims that in 1927 less than 1 percent (8.396) of communists have completed higher education, and even this small group was of limited practical use in providing technical expertise." For these reasons, "during the Cultural Revolution, Stalin initiated a program through which over 100.000 workers and Communists from the factories and apparatus were mobilized and sent to higher technical schools", p.150.

21 Paradoxically, Fitzpatrick provides a detailed description of the class composition in USSR, *cf.* Fitzpatrick 1992, pp.65-90

circumstances.”²² Žižek formulated this beautifully:

It is easy to fall in love with the crazy creative unrest of the first years after the October Revolution, with suprematists, futurists, constructivists, and so on, competing for primacy in revolutionary fervor; it is much more difficult to recognize in the horrors of the forced collectivization of the late 1920s the attempt to translate this revolutionary fervor into a new positive social order. There is nothing ethically more disgusting than revolutionary Beautiful Souls who refuse to recognize, in the Cross of the postrevolutionary present, the truth of their own flowering dreams about freedom.²³

When we called Stalinist rule a ‘Stalinist deviation,’ we were still at the level of seeking the causes of Stalin’s catastrophic rule at the level of the superstructure, we are still incapable of explaining the inner source of contradiction in the apparatus that truly shaped the space of possible strategies within that historical situation. Althusser attempted to test a “*genuine Marxist analysis*.”²⁴ In his understanding, the International Communist Movement, from the 1930s, was affected by a *single deviation*, which he calls “the Stalinian deviation.” This tendency of this deviation was an economic one:

Keeping things *well in proportion*, that is to say, respecting essential distinctions, but nevertheless going beyond the most obvious phenomena -- which are, in spite of their extremely serious character, historically secondary: I mean those which are generally grouped together in Communist Parties under the heading “personality cult” and “dogmatism” -- the Stalinian deviation can be considered as a *form* (a *special form*, converted by the state of the world class struggle, the existence of a single socialist State, and the State power held by the Bolshevik Party) of the *posthumous revenge of the Second International* : as a revival of its main tendency.²⁵

This poses a series of questions and opens up a new problematic. Let us also remember an important fact: unlike Trotsky, Althusser was supportive of the formula of ‘socialism in one country.’ The problematic opened up by Althusser takes the form of a series of questions:

The most obvious of these problems can be stated in the following

.....
22 Dimitrov 2003, p.121

23 Žižek 2006, p.5

24 Althusser 2006, p.128

25 Ibid.

way: *how* could a basically economistic tendency have combined with the superstructural effects we know so well, effects which it produced as the transformation of its own forms? *What* were the material forms of existence of this tendency, which enabled it to produce these effects in the existing conjuncture? *How* did this tendency, centred from a certain time onwards on the USSR, spread through the whole International Communist Movement, and what special -- and sometimes differing -- forms did it take?²⁶

Althusser suggests that the first answer should be looked for in Lenin, precisely at the beginning of the 7th chapter of his *The Collapse of the Second International*. Far from endorsing ‘historicism,’ but because of the continuity in the Labour Movement, of all the obstacles, of the contradictions, as well as its deviations, which according to Althusser, because of the “because of the continuity of a single class struggle against the bourgeoisie, and of a single class struggle (economic, political *and ideological-theoretical*) of the bourgeoisie against the Labour Movement.”²⁷ In other words, the deviation is rooted not in the Thermidor, but precisely in the Second International – and Lenin continuously struggled against idealist-economist tendency – and not in the Third, which Stalin dominated in the 1930s. Lenin didn’t reduce the Second International to its deviations.

If all this is true, Althusser argues, that is, if the “Stalinian” deviation cannot be reduced to “violations of Soviet legality” alone; if it is related to more profound causes in history and in the *conception* of the class struggle and of class *position* ; and even supposing that the Soviet people are now protected from all violations of *legality* -- it does not follow that either they or we have completely overcome the “Stalinian” deviation (neither the causes, nor the mechanisms, nor the effects of which have been the object of a “concrete analysis” in the Leninist sense, that is to say, of a scientific Marxist analysis) *simply on account of the denunciation of the “personality cult”*, or by a patient work of rectification unenlightened by any analysis. In these conditions, with all the information, past and present, available to us (including the official silence, which refuses to pronounce against these facts), we can bet that the Stalinian “line”, purged of “violations of legality” and therefore “liberalized” -- with economism and humanism working together -- has, for better or worse, survived Stalin and -- it should not be astonishing! -- the Twentieth Congress. One is even justified in supposing that, behind the talk about the different varieties of “humanism”, whether restrained or not, this “line” continues to pursue an honourable career, in a peculiar

.....
26 Ibid

27 Ibid.

kind of silence, a sometimes talkative and sometimes mute silence, which is now and again broken by the noise of an explosion or a split.²⁸

To this, Althusser proposes the critique that what is fundamentally at stake, with the “Stalinian” deviation, is to be found in the struggle, line, practices and principles of the Chinese Revolution (from the Long March to the Cultural Revolution and its results). But, this shall not concern us in this paper.

The Revolution Betrayed, is considered Trotsky's main work on the analyses and critiques of the wrong course which the Soviet Union took from 1924. For Trotsky, Stalin presents “the Soviet Thermidor.”²⁹ In this work, Trotsky also criticises Stalin for his bureaucracy:

It would be naive to imagine that Stalin, previously unknown to the masses, suddenly issued from the wings full armed with a complete strategical plan. No indeed. Before he felt out his own course, the bureaucracy felt out Stalin himself. He brought it all the necessary guarantees: the prestige of an old Bolshevik, a strong character, narrow vision, and close bonds with the political machine as the sole source of his influence. The success which fell upon him was a surprise at first to Stalin himself. It was the friendly welcome of the new ruling group, trying to free itself from the old principles and from the control of the masses, and having need of a reliable arbiter in its inner affairs. A secondary figure before the masses and in the events of the revolution, Stalin revealed himself as the indubitable leader of the Thermidorian bureaucracy, as first in its midst.³⁰

And then he adds that

The bureaucracy conquered something more than the Left Opposition. It conquered the Bolshevik party. It defeated the program of Lenin, who had seen the chief danger in the conversion of the organs of the state “from servants of society to lords over society.” It defeated all these enemies, the Opposition, the party and Lenin, not with ideas and arguments, but with its own social weight. The leaden rump of bureaucracy outweighed the head of the revolution. That is the secret of the Soviet's Thermidor.³¹

28 Ibid., pp.130-131

29 Trotsky 1936.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

Through this concept, Trotsky wants to present Stalin as a deviation from the initial aims of Bolshevism and from the aims and goals of the October Revolution. But, is that the case? Let us take the case of the brutal collectivization carried out by Stalin from 1928. For Žižek, this was the true act - in the sense that it meant a wager, with no certainty of success:

If we really want to name an act which was truly daring, for which one truly had to “have the balls” to try the impossible, but which was simultaneously a horrible act, an act causing suffering beyond comprehension, it was Stalin's forced collectivization in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1920s.³²

This goes against Fitzpatrick's thesis of collectivization as the end of the proper revolutionary sequence and the revolutionary fervour. Thus we should oppose the standard Trotskyite argument that Stalinism was a deviation, along with opposing another equally problematic thesis which argues that Communism is, at its core, a totalitarian project.³³ Further, as Marxists we should cease to look for the moment of the Fall, for “the moment when things took the wrong turn in the history of Marxism”³⁴ – which goes from Engels to Mao. And we can add any other singular name of the history of Marxism and Communism to this list. As Žižek argues, the only great displacement that took place in the history of Marxism is the “passage from Marx to Lenin, as well as the passage from Lenin to Mao.”³⁵

The collectivisation in the USSR is the moment in which Stalin was the most radical Trotskyite: implementing a program which was initially the program of Trotsky. In this regard, Žižek is right to argue that “Trotsky is at the origin of Stalinism, namely, that, from the late 1920s onwards, Stalin merely applied and developed measures first envisaged by Trotsky in the years of “war communism”.”³⁶

Following this, our thesis is that Stalin is *not* a deviation from the Bolshevik revolution, but it is a necessary phase in it. If Trotsky had won, we wouldn't get a different type of socialism; we would get Stalinism maybe without its brutal excesses. The problem with Trotskyism is that it

32 Žižek 2006, p.285

33 Cf. Žižek 2000

34 Žižek 2007, p.1

35 Ibid.

36 Žižek 2009, p.223

is the other side of the same coin with Stalinism. It was Trotsky's attitude which made him lose the struggle for state power with Stalin.

The Stalin/Trotsky opposition, and its lesson that "dreams can be corrupted," hides therefore the much more disturbing lesson. That the realization of a dream can require us to face ourselves as totally estranged from our ideals: it is the lesson that Trotsky shun away from, and the lesson Stalin benefited from. Trotsky's rejection of Stalin was personalist because he was personally affected by it: by the fact that Stalin brought about several of the plans which Trotsky had helped to design, with consequences so removed from the revolutionaries' motives that he could not answer for it. This logic is the logic which any communist movement - that is a movement for power, without the help of the existing state - must come to terms with: how to deal with the anguish not of power's corruption, but of power's feebleness to control the destiny of an experiment? No one, before the Bolsheviks, had truly faced the situation of being the subjects and sovereigns of a social catastrophe - it has happened before and since: States crumbling, genocide, horror and violence; but there has always been an instance to mediate between the subjects and their own sovereignty, to assign blame, to make it so that no one would have to recognize themselves in the possibility of disaster. Communists, by choice and principle, do not have access to this mechanism - we must be able to face estrangement precisely so that, looking it in the face, and tarrying with it, we might avoid the worst, which is to assign to the possibility of social catastrophe the properties of a natural one: unavoidable, merciless and impossible to change.

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