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## **PART II**

# **THREE FRAMES IN THE CONTEMPORARY CYCLE**

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## CHAPTER THREE

# INSIDE THE GUIDING STAR: THE REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALIST FRAME

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*“somewhere up in the sky there is a guiding star ... And that guiding star has been there since 1917 and will stay there until we have our revolution.”<sup>263</sup>*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In identifying the revolutionary socialist (RS) frame utilised within the current movement of movements this chapter locates a number of central elements: a particular understanding of class struggle, a belief in the objective truth of Marxism, a belief in the need for revolutionary change (characterised as sudden and violent) and the centrality of the vanguard party to that project. This list is related to, but distinguishable from the elements that Freeden’s authoritative study places at the core of socialism. The latter are: the constitutive nature of human relationships; human welfare as a desirable objective; human nature as active (creativity); equality; and history as the arena of beneficial change.<sup>264</sup> This difference stems from two reasons. First, unlike Freeden I have limited my analysis to those professing revolutionary ideas, since they form a significant section of the current movements with a distinctive structure of beliefs. It is hardly surprising that a belief in revolution, where it is present, would become central to the broader belief structure since it depends on a very radical critique of the present and must determine a strategy for the future. Second, the sources of data for the RS frame are activists involved in contemporary protest movements involving significant interactions with actors utilising different frames. Because, as I will demonstrate, the RS frame contains a stress on bringing activists from other movements into the revolutionary vanguard, both ideas and action appear to shift according to the surrounding movement context.

Understanding revolutionary socialism in contemporary movements requires an understanding of their history. It is obvious that Marxism - in its characterisation of

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<sup>263</sup> ‘Hardy’, interview, December 2004

<sup>264</sup> Freeden, M., 1996, *Ideologies and Political Theory. A Conceptual Approach*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford), p. 426-6.

capitalism, in its understanding of the nature of classes and in its understanding of history - provides a direct route to the creation of activist frames that provide both an understanding of the world and a justification for radically contentious action. Outlining the history of British Trotskyism offers an initial understanding of the way that theory and philosophy have fed into action. I will highlight a number of issues which have been definitional for the way that Trotskyists generally understand the world. The second section brings the analysis up to date, and into contact with the contemporary cycle of contention. Here it becomes possible to specify both the particular relationships among concepts within the RS frame, and the reactions in rhetoric and belief that come from the specific nature of the contemporary movements. It is in contemporary analysis that it becomes possible to specify an orientational frame as conceptualised in chapter one. The analysis of class struggle and exploitation will enable understanding of the nature of power in the current frame, while the notions of equality and community (through common ownership) together with the nature of revolution will enable a particular specification of democracy within the RS frame.

## 2. THE LONG VIEW: A BRIEF HISTORY OF TROTSKYISM IN BRITAIN.

This section traces the development of revolutionary socialism in Britain. It is the Trotskyist version of socialism that I will focus on, almost exclusively, in this chapter. In organisational terms the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) will be put primarily, though not exclusively, in the spotlight. By weight of numbers the Trotskyists dominate the organised revolutionary left, and the SWP dominate the Trotskyists. According to 'Leftist Parties of the World' researched by the *Marxist Internet Archive*, there are eighteen active Trotskyist groups in the UK (and several listed as 'ex-Trotskyist').<sup>265</sup> By comparison there are less than 10 other revolutionary socialist groups active in the UK, some of whom describe themselves as Leninist and have very much in common with the groups described here.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Information as of May 2005, 'Leftist Parties of the World' is available at the *Marxist Internet Archive*, at: <http://www.marxists.org/admin/intro/index.htm>

<sup>266</sup> It may be noted that since the 1950s, as the extent of the Stalinist purges begun to be understood, and again with new information since the 1990s the scope of ideational resources for the revolutionary left has been reduced. It became rhetorically essential for organisations to defend themselves against the charge of Stalinism, a particular challenge for those groups that had a long term history of communication with (and funding from) the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

## ***Socialist Internationalism***

British Trotskyism cannot be understood without reference to its international organisations; its ideology insists on the necessity of international socialism:

“The experience of Russia demonstrates that a socialist revolution cannot survive in one country. China and Cuba, like the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc, have nothing to do with socialism. They are state capitalist regimes which oppress and exploit workers.”<sup>267</sup>

Since the foundation of the International Workingmen’s Association in 1864 (now known as the First International) there has been a convoluted history of attempts at international coordination of revolutionary socialist activities. The key historical points of reference for the present study begin with the creation of the Comintern (the Communist International or third international) by Lenin and Trotsky in 1917. Lenin’s democratic centralism (implying the idea of the primacy of the international organisation), together with his insistence on strict party discipline set the tone and organisational form of revolutionary socialism across Europe.

Following Lenin’s death, the absolute domination of Comintern by Stalin from the mid 1920s led eventually to Trotsky’s admission of the impossibility of working for socialist revolution through that organisation. In 1938 he and the Left Opposition which had been attempting to influence the Comintern from a distance, set up the Fourth International (FI). The tangled and fractious history of international Trotskyism has led to the present situation, where there are at least two dozen Trotskyist internationals, of which many claim to be either a continuation or a re-foundation of the original FI. Additionally, since 1989 there has been a ‘League for the Fifth International’ of which Workers Power is the British section.

## ***Similarity and Difference***

As the present plurality of internationals suggests, there are deep divides among the Trotskyist groups. Their ideological positions clearly have a great deal more common content than that which separates them. The deepest divisions stem from variance over the interpretation of the Russian revolutions but, as we shall see, stretches much deeper into the fundamental belief structures than is at first apparent. In fact the mention of the state capitalist thesis in the International Socialist Tendency (IST) quote presented above hints at one of the most important, definitional splits in British Trotskyism.

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<sup>267</sup> International Socialist Tendency, 2004, “Internationalism”, available at: <http://www.istendency.net/node/view/6>

In labelling the USSR and the Eastern Bloc as state capitalist, it is possible to see a key example in the differentiation of contemporary Trotskyists and Trotsky's own thinking. Trotsky's view on the Russian experience was that the USSR became a 'degenerated workers state', dominated by a bureaucratic layer within society, who reaped personal material reward in a novel relationship to the means of production. The presence of a centrally planned economy together with state ownership of the means of production was seen as evidence that capitalism had been transcended. The development of the true workers' state, however, was being held back by the growth of the caste of bureaucrats, administrators and managers. Within the degenerated workers state the workers had, in fact, lost political control, requiring a political (though not total) revolution to restore power to a dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>268</sup>

Alternative interpretations of the USSR have been present within Trotskyism since the 1930s. Describing the USSR as 'state capitalist' or 'bureaucratic capitalist', these imply that a counter revolutionary struggle had succeeded in bringing capitalist relations back into the life of every Russian was aired among the Trotskyists since the 1930s. However, Trotsky's position was not strongly challenged until 1948 when Tony Cliff began to circulate his 'state capitalist' thesis among members of the Revolutionary Communist Party<sup>269</sup> – the only Trotskyist organisation in Britain at the time, and the national section of the Fourth International. This made two notable claims. First, Trotsky had erred in inferring from the form of property ownership the actual relations of production. As Cliff argued, it was the relations of production that created and maintained the class structure that gave capitalism its shape, and contained its historically significant contradictions. The massive denial of elementary workers' rights and their exclusion from political and economic decision making demonstrated the continued existence of a class society. Second Cliff claimed that competition had not, in fact, been displaced by the collective ownership of the means of production. In keeping with Trotsky's conception of the permanent revolution, Cliff argued that the USSR was set in an international context of capitalist relations, and was thus forced into competing economically and militarily with both states and corporations from abroad. The bureaucratic counter-revolution, in order to put the USSR in a position of military strength perceived to be necessary for its own survival, became willing and able to dictate to the proletariat.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Callinicos, A., 1990, *Trotskyism*, (Open University Press, Buckingham) pp. 14-16. Callaghan, *The Far Left*, pp. 84-5.

<sup>269</sup> Later published as Cliff, T., 1974[1955], *State Capitalism in Russia*, (Pluto, London).

<sup>270</sup> Callinicos, *Trotskyism*, pp. 73-79.

This debate led to a significant split in what had already been an organisation already divided by factionalism.<sup>271</sup> The Socialist Review Group was formed around Cliff's views and eventually became the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), undoubtedly the most significant Trotskyist organisation currently operating in the UK. The reward for the 'state capitalist' heresy was to be barred, almost immediately, from the Fourth International resulting in the creation of the International Socialist Tendency for those sympathetic to the state capitalist theory. The divisions created by such a detailed and theoretical argument indicate a number of things about the development of Trotskyist thought. It demonstrates the emotional charge that Russia had for revolutionaries; that this is still the case is evinced by the leading quote to this chapter. It also helps us locate the position of internationalism within Trotskyist thought, that is that internationalism flows from the notion of permanent revolution itself, not the experiences of Russia in particular. Trotskyists who hold the 'degenerated workers' state' thesis, active today, agree that,

“The whole idea of building ‘socialism in one country’ is reactionary. A successful revolution in one country would have to spread quickly to others. If not, it would either be defeated by an imperialist attack, or would corrode from within like the USSR under Stalin.”<sup>272</sup>

Most importantly, it shows the importance of establishing truth. The status of knowledge within Marxism will be discussed below, and is implicated in a number of other significant beliefs. The real impact of the state capitalist thesis is that it had deep ramifications for the interpretation of Marxist doctrine, and thus for the future of class struggle. As SWP leader and historian, Alex Callinicos puts it:

“If not only the Soviet Union but also the Eastern European states, China, Vietnam and Cuba represented, not a deformed socialism, but a variant of capitalism, then there was no question of socialism being achieved without the self-activity of the working class.”<sup>273</sup>

There is, in fact, a logical fallacy in this point: it is not necessarily the case that all avenues for a 'top-down' construction of socialism have been exhausted, even if the authoritarian 'socialisms' so far seen have failed. This demonstrates, rather, that the idea of socialism in an authoritarian context offends the notions of equality and emancipation that are so central to the orthodox Marxist doctrine. The state capitalist thesis, on this reading, radically re-centres Trotskyism on a Marxist base, and Callinicos' fallacy may indicate the importance the author places on these ideas. A more grounded exposition of the same point is simply that would-be revolutionary socialists

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<sup>271</sup> Callaghan, J., 1987, *The Far Left in British Politics*, (Blackwell, Oxford), p. 57.

<sup>272</sup> Revolution, 2002, *What We Stand For. Manifesto produced by Revolution National Committee*, p. 12.

<sup>273</sup> Callinicos, *Trotskyism*, p. 79.

were deeply troubled by association with Stalinism, and needed the theoretical critique of Stalinism from a revolutionary position.<sup>274</sup> However, as we will see in the following sections, these commitments continue to compete with notions of the vanguard, and of democratic centralism which in practice makes the commitment to the ‘self-activity of the working class’ more difficult to concretely pursue than merely to promote.

### ***The Growth of the UK Organisations***

Two other significant splinters from the Revolutionary Communist Party have had a long running relevance to the British left. Founded by Gerry Healy, ‘the Club’ became the ‘Socialist Labour League’ but remained small enough to be utterly reliant on the entryist tactic, of joining the ‘reformist organisations of the proletariat’ (the Labour Party and CND in this case) in order to promote the revolutionary perspective. Their principle mobilising claim was to indicate the imminence of the vast economic crisis into which Britain was heading, which must be taken advantage of by a revolutionary party. While the group increased in size and became the Workers’ Revolutionary Party in 1973, with the self-confidence to declare themselves a potential vanguard party, their politics never really changed. Under Healy the group became increasingly millenarian, repeatedly offering the prospectus of the collapse of capitalism in the UK measured in months. It also became cultist and violent, finally imploding when allegations of Healy’s sexual abuse of women in the group surfaced.<sup>275</sup> Nevertheless, Healy’s final splinter from his own group, the Marxist Party, retains a small active membership today. More importantly, while the pronouncements of imminent crisis were exaggerated to caricature proportions among the Healy group, they remain a vital argumentative tool within Trotskyist propaganda. For instance, one local activist’s thoroughly argued explanation for the war on Iraq claimed:

“The Bush administration senses that the US economy is just one recession away from entering a Japanese-style deflationary spiral... [from which] there is no escape. This is not just another economic crisis... the very nature of the war on Iraq [is] determined by the overall context, of a capitalist world economy on the verge of a global depression”<sup>276</sup>

In addition, “political radicalisation, in the context of sharply-declining living standards and deepening economic crisis, threatens to provoke revolutions.”<sup>277</sup> We find within

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<sup>274</sup> In his memoir the comedian and long-term SWP member, Mark Steel, explains how his discovery of the state-capitalist thesis through the SWP allowed him to identify himself as a revolutionary socialist. At the time he had simplified, “the Russians aren’t socialist, they’re shit”; Steel, M., 2001, *Reasons to be Cheerful*, (Scribner, London).

<sup>275</sup> Callaghan, *The Far Left*, pp. 55-83.

<sup>276</sup> Smith, J., 2003, *Why is Britain Going to War*, article widely circulated by email, pp. 8-9.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*

such statements an indication of the continuing force of the dialectic approach to history developed by Marx and his disciples. A deep economic crisis, demonstrating the international contradictions of capitalism and potentially resulting in revolution is an image regularly portrayed.

Another significant splinter was headed by Ted Grant, who was briefly aligned with Healy's faction within the Revolutionary Communist Party, but, after his expulsion, moved into the Labour Party in order to create an entryist group of militant Leninists. It was this tactic to which he had been committed since the mid-1930s, and was suitably rewarded when his tiny group was recognised as the official British Section of the Fourth International in the late 1950s. By the 1970s his group had grown significantly and become known as the Militant Tendency and eventually members gained electoral success both nationally and locally and they achieved a large degree of disruptive power within the Labour Party. Party leader Neil Kinnock's purges of the Militant entryists from the Labour party were successful, though the group were, in any case, discussing the virtues of taking more open action as an independent organisation. In the anti-poll tax campaign they took a high profile role, and are currently active as the Socialist Party. The most enduring aspect of this tendency, however, has been "Militant's scorn for the rest of the Left. It regards all other Marxist organizations .. as the 'anti-Marxist sects'." But, according to Callaghan's analysis:

"This attitude is perfectly in keeping with the Leninist credentials of the Militant leaders. Being steeped in this tradition they have learned to regard rival organizations, especially those closest to their own ideological positions, as dangerous obstacles to socialism."<sup>278</sup>

This is a major critical theme within Callaghan's work. The search for ideological purity, and the legacy of "Comintern documents [that] referred repeatedly to the need to 'brand not only the bourgeoisie but also its helpers, the reformists of every shade, systematically and pitilessly'."<sup>279</sup> helps to explain the continued factionalism among Trotskyist organisations. The most vitriolic critiques of any revolutionary organisation are often found among the writings of their competitors. Factionalism is another key theme to which we will return throughout this chapter, it connects with the notion of Marxism as science and the importance placed, therefore, on establishing truth.

Having outlined three major groupings, the details of the continuing splits, infighting, expulsions and even beatings meted out to those with opposing ideological understandings need not concern us. What I would emphasise from this brief sketch is the extent to which there is a common developmental path taken by many Trotskyist

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<sup>278</sup> Callaghan, *The Far Left*, pp. 209.

<sup>279</sup> Callaghan, *The Far Left*, p.8.

organisations. The commitment to entryism, coming from the recognition of their own numerical weakness within the Fourth International has, under particular leaders, been abandoned when the leadership perceived that the organisation was strong enough to stand alone, on the basis of its own revolutionary membership, and potentially become the single vanguard party of the revolution. Behind entryism we can see the relationship between epistemology and a theory of working class consciousness. Even in Lenin's practice within the Comintern, the notion that the ideological purity of the revolutionaries would win over the working class was central. While it may be difficult to break through the ideological hegemony of the capitalist system, the strong presentation of the case for revolution will eventually motivate those on the left to give up on 'reformist' organisations and take up the revolutionary position. This is only possible when the analysis is considered objectively true and powerful. The entryist tactic, however, has somewhat fallen by the wayside, to be replaced by the united front. The membership boom that each of these organisations experienced through the 1960s gave them the confidence to take on the 'vanguard party' role. Once this self-perception was created it became possible, to return to united front action, whereby the revolutionaries can work alongside reformist organisations as a partnership of equals, rather than the semi-covert usurpation of reformist organisations necessitated by weakness.<sup>280</sup> However, the justification for the tactic is the same: presentation of the strong revolutionary line will eventually demonstrate its validity above that of the reformist parties, which are ultimately bound to capitulate to capital. The united front tactic, it may be noted, was adopted by Lenin following the utter failure of a 'divide and rule' approach to the national sections of the Comintern, whereby the international leadership engineered splits in the belief that the reformist elements would wither, while the revolutionary elements would emerge with the full backing of the politically conscious proletariat. The united front tactic as applied in the 1930s was more bellicose than that of today, however. While revolutionary groups would join 'reformists' for particular campaigns, they would also loudly denounce their policies in the public sphere; it was no secret that they were certain of their own position and only taking part in order to demonstrate the corruption of the reformists who were not acting in the true interests of the working class. Today's adaptation is a little more subtle. United front organisations may well be created on the initiative of a Trotskyist organisation, or alternatively emerge more or less spontaneously from a set of events. Either way, the revolutionaries will attempt (or at least appear to attempt) to work with others on

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<sup>280</sup> It should be noted that membership numbers have dropped. The SWP presently has somewhere around 2,000 presently, compared with about 4,000 in the late 1960s. Nevertheless, the return from the status of vanguard party to that of entryist minority cannot be possible.

genuinely equal terms, without the automatic denial of the claims of those from other political backgrounds. How exactly this functions within the current movement context will be examined in section three.

An alternative description of this choice of tactics is simply that Trotskyist organisations work wherever they perceive there to be a potential membership base of active leftists, in order to recruit them to their own party. It is this view that is taken by many within the broader anti-capitalist movement with regard to the SWP. A little more detail on the SWP's history of interaction with broader movements may demonstrate why. Tony Cliff's Socialist Review Group, as it gained strength, became International Socialism (IS) and demonstrated a confidence in debating ideas and an openness to dissent through its federalist, democratic structure. At this time its membership rose steadily, but was drawn from the student body and the 'caring professions', rather than the industrial working class required by the Trotskyist plan. Cliff's thinking regarding the role of the revolutionary party was, at the time, influenced by Rosa Luxemburg rather than Trotsky. Luxemburg had criticised Lenin's strict centralism and argued instead that the socialist organisation must be built from the bottom up. However, Cliff moved to the orthodox Leninist-Trotskyist position in the early 1970s and reorganised the party along democratic centralist lines. According to John Callaghan's reading of these events this reflected a deep disappointment with the political convulsions of 1968 that had petered out without achieving any real revolutionary potential.<sup>281</sup> Cliff felt that a 'turn to class' required greater party discipline, exercised through the democratic centralist structure.

The rising wage militancy among the industrial working classes during the 1970s signalled, for those in the IS, an increasing politicisation, which held promise for the revolutionary party.<sup>282</sup> However, 1968 had seen the membership double, and the party paper was re-branded the *Socialist Worker*. On the basis of this increased strength (although membership was still only around 4,000) and the analysis that the Wilson government proved that the Labour Party had nothing on offer to the working class, IS turned all its attention to building rank and file groups within industry. This met with a degree of success and Cliff's revolutionary appetite had been whetted; he insisted on the 'proletarianisation' of both the party and the paper, bringing in branch members from provincial industrial towns to both the central executive and the paper's editorial board. Using this as his justification he massively changed the organisation's structure, giving himself "an unassailable position and enabled him to launch major initiatives – such as

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<sup>281</sup> Callaghan, *The Far Left*, pp. 94-5.

<sup>282</sup> Callaghan, *The Far Left*, pp. 96-7.

... the Socialist Workers' Party in January 1977 – without the need for a discussion within the ranks.”<sup>283</sup> The creation of the SWP marked another increase in confidence, the party was intended to stand as an alternative to both the Labour Party and the CPGB, organise strike action through branches, and ultimately take on the role of the vanguard party. The internal structure of the SWP is now very distant from Cliff's Luxemburg inspired organisation of the 1960s, and has been described (by a member of a rival party) as “a hierarchical organisation which is dominated by a self-perpetuating Central Committee and which prides itself on ruthlessly banning all internal factions and organised dissension”.<sup>284</sup>

### ***Trotskyism and the New Social Movements***

In order to bring this analysis up to date the interplay of the Trotskyist organisations with the new social movements (NSMs)<sup>285</sup> since the 1960s and particularly since 1989 must be considered. From the point of view of midway through the second decade after the collapse of communism the histories of the far left undoubtedly require a new chapter with a long view and deep reflection. I will argue that we may legitimately extrapolate some of the trends already emerging in the 1960s to the continued behaviour of Trotskyist organizations toward the new approaches to radicalism. Throughout the rest of this chapter I will describe aspects of these relationships within the current cycle of contention, which may serve to ground this extrapolation.

A number of movements emerged from the late 1960s onwards, to whom the Trotskyist organisations could not help but be attracted. The movement against the war in Vietnam and the women's movement were two obvious contenders. The former drew its protagonists mostly from the student body and peace activists in CND. The 'deep entryist' organisation, the International Marxist Group, had been hidden inside the Labour party, making gains particularly in its youth section. Through the latter it established the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, and led the movement into radicalism, drawing 100,000 to march in 1966 under the banner of 'Victory to the NLF'. IS was also

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<sup>283</sup> Callaghan, *The Far Left*, p. 101.

<sup>284</sup> Perrin, 2000, “Another leader called Tony” in *The Socialist Standard*, Journal of the Socialist Party. Available at: <http://www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/may00/cliff.html>; last accessed 12/06/05.

<sup>285</sup> In Chapter 1 I criticise the notion of the new social movement within social movement theory. In this context it is to be understood as shorthand for those movements that emerged from the 1960s onwards that were not self-consciously connected with class struggle, but instead oriented to the articulation of rights and equality surrounding gender, sexuality, race, the environment and peace. However, I do not mean to imply any of analysis of these movements that is found in the corpus of 'new social movement theory'.

active within the campaign, recruiting a good number of students to its cause. Nevertheless, the Trotskyist analysis of the situation, and their strategy for dealing with it, were rarely heard, indeed, “believers in the virtues of spontaneous direct action... were more numerous than the Leninists among VSC’s rank and file.”<sup>286</sup>

The politics of the women’s movement was more complicated because the radical activists here were consciously looking for a form of organisation that would eradicate the faults they perceived in any prior radical organisations. The reaction of a number of Trotskyist organisations was simply to dismiss the movement as a middle-class phenomenon (WRP, Militant), while others partially recognised the claims of the movement while downplaying some of the most important claims by arguing vehemently that the personal was not political, and it was not the business of revolutionary organisations to dictate people’s lifestyles. “The SWP, while recognizing the importance of women as an agency of revolution, sees itself as *the* nucleus of a revolutionary party to which all revolutionary forces must rally... Accordingly the SWP’s *Women’s Voice* was concerned primarily with women as workers or strikers and with both in so far as they were potential recruits to the SWP.”<sup>287</sup> The critique of claims concerning the importance of the personal and the cultural as ‘lifestyle politics’ remains pronounced within the range of Trotskyist organisations - a critique that seems to flow easily from the primacy of economics and the state within classical Marxism. This continues to create disharmony with a range of other activist currents. Indeed, one interviewee, previously a member of the SWP for many years claimed that, “what’s required is a revolution in people’s social relationships, and the only way you can have these social relationship is to start living them.” But, that is exactly, “what my old Trotskyist self would dismiss as lifestylism.”<sup>288</sup>

There are certainly many other examples that could be considered. However, these two may suffice to give an indication of the struggles to come when Trotskyist organisations attempt to engage with the new social movements. We find repeatedly that the attempt to approach the novel claims of new movements from the perspective of class struggle produces a clash in both interpretations and strategies. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the working class had almost universally been identified as the industrial working class, and so within the Trotskyist understanding the new movements had less status. The centrality of the notion of the working class as the exclusive agent of revolution is difficult to fit with the existence of radical systemic

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<sup>286</sup> Callaghan, *The Far Left*, p. 123.

<sup>287</sup> Callaghan, *The Far Left*, p. 139.

<sup>288</sup> ‘Daniel’, interview, July 2004.

critique and contentious action that draws from a broad socio-economic base, and refuses to argue solely within the rhetoric of economics. It is both the nature of the struggles, and the competing orientational frames of participants in the new movements that contribute to this difficulty. This is what Carver identifies as the line between Marxism and post-Marxism: “Marxists have engaged in vigorous debate with post-Marxists, insisting that the latter have abandoned class politics and hence any systematic account of the ‘action-oriented ideas’ that Marxism has handed down for contemporary adaptation. Post-Marxists have treated class as a ‘social imaginary’ like any other ‘new’ social movement, with the potential for developing ideas and practices that would be politically persuasive in mass action.”<sup>289</sup> We will see in Part III below that similar attitudes (although with a broader definition of the working class) are pervasive today, and colour interactions within the current cycle of contention.

There has been a shift in the position of Trotskyist groups from focusing explicitly within the labour movement, to engaging with any mass popular contention. They have (sometimes unwillingly) accepted this shift, and at times continue to idolise the shrinking manual working class. A number of historic trends have counted against the viability of class struggle in Britain. High unemployment under Prime Minister Thatcher, the dismantling of union powers and the restructuring of the economy toward service are domestic causes, all bolstered by the changing nature of political conflict in the West, the global collapse of communism and the long boom. However, Trotskyism tends to subsume other struggles within that of class. The claims of particular groups to have their oppression recognised and combated, if not based on class lines are seen as misunderstood. The usual argument is that multiple oppressions are the result of a capitalist strategy of ‘divide and rule’ applied to the working class. So, for example, racism needs to be combated because it divides the working class, thus making it much harder to achieve a revolutionary consciousness.

I have resisted the temptation to present the foregoing analysis in terms of orientational frames, given the necessity (established in chapter one) for detailed ethnographic examination to fully understand the ideas being utilised by activists. What should be clear is that despite the multiplicity of factions and tendencies, splits and splinters within British Trotskyism the central ideological principles have remained remarkably constant and – barring the state capitalism thesis – loyal to Trotsky’s own analyses. The tradition of Trotskyist organisation in the UK has therefore transmitted a number of ideational elements that can be used by contemporary

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<sup>289</sup> Carver, T., 2001, “Did ideology fall with ‘the wall’? Marx, Marxism and Post-Marxism” in Freedman, M., (ed.) *Reassessing Political Ideologies. The Durability of Dissent*, (Routledge, London), p.46.

activists to provide both interpretative resources and tactical repertoires. Central components include the Marxist critique of capitalism, the permanent revolution, the roles of the vanguard party, and democratic centralism. Furthermore, the connections between these elements have also been highlighted, because it is not the ideas themselves, but their locations within the broader system of beliefs that provides meaning.

### 3. THE REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALIST FRAME: CLASS STRUGGLE UNDER ADVANCED CAPITALIST HEGEMONY.

Marxism provides all the necessary ideational elements to fulfil the functions that a collective action frame, in the sense attributed to Gamson in chapter one, is ‘supposed’ to fulfil. That is, it provides a clear critique of current social arrangements, a range of solutions, a strategy for bringing those solutions about that confirms the agency of participants, and a strong shared identity for those who pursue change. This exposition will proceed in roughly that order demonstrating the specific decontestations of key concepts that flow from the tradition of British Trotskyism. We will see a high level of consistency in the orientational frames applied by Trotskyist activists; implying that the frames are not very open to novel ideas. It will become apparent that a number of prominent ideational elements - the notion of truth in Marxism, the idea of class consciousness, and the commitment to class - contribute to the constraint on accepting new ideas and methods. This presentation relates the various frame elements to the general guiding themes which I similarly draw from the other frames identified in this thesis: power, knowledge, democracy and organisation. These are issues to which all orientational frames within the contemporary cycle of contention are oriented.

#### ***The Marxist Base***

Naturally, those active within Trotskyist organisations take a fairly orthodox Marxist approach to critique of the current international political economy:

“fundamentally, we go to work all day long, pulling the levers on the machine, or in my case I work in a school, which is training people to pull the levers when they leave school, so that they will produce the wealth. And we are effectively ruled over by a class of people who do not do the work, and that is the problem. There are two classes in the world, and they exist in every country, even the poorest countries have their rulers, and it’s the same the whole world over.”<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> ‘Hardy’, interview, December 2004. The same points are raised prominently in the manifestos and propaganda of Trotskyist organisations, for example: SWP, undated, “Where we stand”, published weekly in *Socialist Worker*, available at: <http://www.swp.org.uk/where.php>; Revolution, 2002, *What We Stand For*, p. 1.

While offering a very simplified understanding, such comments display what is at the core of the RS frame. Centrally, there is a division of society into two fundamentally opposed classes. The notion that ‘we do all the work’ calls up the idea of exploitation of one class by another and is this essence of the critique of capitalist society. The international financial institutions against which the anti-globalisation movement first emerged make sense, therefore, as organisations of the ruling class, through which they ensure their own profits from global capitalism. The World Economic Forum (WEF) is an easy target:

“The WEF prides itself on being "the foremost global partnership of business, political, intellectual and other leaders of society committed to improving the state of the world." But in fact the bottom line -when it comes to the WEF - is just that: the "bottom line" - profits. What is clear is that the WEF is committed only to improving the state of the world for capitalists and capitalist governments.”<sup>291</sup>

Such institutions were frequently targets for mass mobilisations from within all of the orientational frames described here, the particular understanding within the RS frame has clearly been to associate it with the class distinction, participants therefore become the ‘they’ against whom ‘we’ must struggle.

Highlighting class exploitation, that position implies a positive value on equality of some form, although this almost always takes the form of ‘to each according to his need’. As Freedon explains, equality in Marxism has never really meant exact material equality, but rather inequality was “was astutely and innovatively decoded as political inequality, including especially inequalities of power”.<sup>292</sup> The problem clearly identified in the first quote above is ‘being ruled over’. The critique of power inequalities implies, on the positive side, a human equality that resides not in rights (as in liberalism) but in the physical basis for human life: “What do we have in common with each other? Bloody everything is my answer to that, bloody everything, potentially. Now lets get rid of the silly stuff and just think about food, living, transport, getting on with life, basic things like that, that’s what we should - the basic hierarchy of needs.”<sup>293</sup> From this basis, extreme poverty becomes a target of critique, and within the frame the connection between exploitation and developing world is more obvious than would be found in an examination of Trotskyism at any time from the 1920s to the 1980s. This should be understood as a reaction to a number of movements that have focused on these issues within the cycle of contention. To be sure, the RS frame has not lost the ‘workerist’ complexion it gained particularly in connection with industrial action for better pay and

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<sup>291</sup> Workers Power, “What is the World Economic Forum?” in *Workers Power*, 24/08/00.

<sup>292</sup> Freedon, *Ideologies...*, p. 431.

<sup>293</sup> ‘Hardy’, interview, December 2004

conditions during the 1970s and 1980s. However, along with reports of industrial action, and the British business news, the Trotskyist newspapers highlight the policies and actions of government and business that affect the world's poor, whether it concerns debt, patent law (around drugs), or trade tariffs.<sup>294</sup>

Central to Marxist thought is the inseparability of politics and economics; or rather, the determination of all other facets of social life by economic relationships. The result is that government and business in capitalist society are not opposed (as they are, for example, by libertarians) but seen as two aspects of the ruling class, with the same interests. This is exemplified by the description of the WEF, above. The perceived partnership of business and capital is at the root of the notion of imperialism which is used to explain both the poverty-stricken state of the developing world and every war of the last century.

“Lenin said the essence of imperialism was the division of the world between into a tiny number of oppressor states and a great majority of oppressed nations... The essence of imperialism is the exploitation, the idea that rich nations or elites within them somehow or other feeding off the living labour in those poor countries.”<sup>295</sup>

This quotation demonstrates the connection between imperialism and exploitation: the former is the latter writ large. It also indicates that imperialism is carried out by nation-states, therefore the governments of those states are identified (in the strictest sense) with capitalists. The relationship between the imperialist aggressor nation and its colonies is, then, identified as the same as relationship between the ruling class and the working class within any nation. The response given above was actually a critique of the way that the respondent saw other revolutionary socialists using the concept, for he saw essentially that it had been stretched in its myriad applications. The theory of imperialism has had to be adapted to the changing nature of global capitalism, shifting its focus from the Western European colonialists to what was conceived as a more subtle form of imperialism led by the USA. The precise methods of exerting power by imperialists were seen to have changed, but ultimately relied on coercion. What is certain is that nation-states continue to be the agents of imperialism, and motivated by the need to secure markets and resources for the ever-growing monopolistic corporations who are based within their own borders. The boundaries of the conception exclude, therefore, Hardt and Negri's conception, presented in *Empire*.<sup>296</sup> The area of agreement, on the other hand, among practically all revolutionary socialists would be a

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<sup>294</sup> SWP, “Where We Stand: Against Imperialism” in *Socialist Worker* 1890, 21/02/04.

<sup>295</sup> ‘Eldon’, interview, February 2005.

<sup>296</sup> Hardt, M & Negri, A., 2000, *Empire*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts). The critique may be found in Callinicos, A., 2003, “War Under Attack” in *Socialist Review*, April 2003.

number of current trends which may be labelled imperialist, including: the extraction of capital from poor countries through debts; the extraction of resources by multinational companies whose profits go to elites based in the US, Western Europe or Eastern Asia; and the prosecution of wars in the Middle East under the banner of the 'war on terror'. The concept of imperialism, therefore, utilises the Marxist understanding of political economy to answer the particular questions thrown up by the movements in the current cycle of contention. It has consequently become a particularly prominent aspect of the RS frame, and one that, as we shall see in chapter seven, has been utilised from a number of different perspectives.

The ills of the present global economy, then, are explained in terms of exploitation, both within and between nations. "As Rosa Luxemburg said, 'socialism or barbarism', and barbarism can take various forms, all of which are in *The Guardian* every single day - famine, war, unemployment, despair ... the only alternative, is socialism, whereby the workers of the world take control of the means of production."<sup>297</sup> This demonstrates the idea that objectively better conditions of life could be achieved, if power was transferred to the working class. As it is economic relations around production and distribution that defines capitalist society, transferring control of the means of production would result in something other than capitalism. Naturally, given the fundamental position of economic relations within Marxism, it is the control of the means of production that defines socialism as qualitatively new, control must be located within the mass class of the proletariat and would imply a method of economic planning by which to ensure that everybody's needs are met. Socialism is also held to be democratic, (which incidentally leads some working within the RS frame to dismiss Cuba as a potential example of socialism) because, "planning isn't socialist unless its democratic."<sup>298</sup> The Marxist conception of equality on which the RS frame is based simply cannot allow for differences in access to control of productive resources; as Freeden argues, "authoritarian variants which emerged within the socialist tradition ... have distanced themselves from the socialist ideological structures."<sup>299</sup>

The nature of the revolutionary struggle required to wrest control of the means of production from the hands of capitalists and state will be investigated shortly. First, however, a brief note on knowledge is appropriate. The Marxist approach to ideology is briefly discussed in chapter one where the application of the term to the ideas propagated by the ruling class was noted. Marx argued that the very relations of

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<sup>297</sup> 'Hardy', interview, December 2004

<sup>298</sup> 'Kara', interview, December 2004

<sup>299</sup> Freeden, *Ideologies...*, p. 439.

production determined the possibility for understanding the world, leading to the often-quoted notion that, “The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas”<sup>300</sup> An opposing aspect is clearly most relevant to grassroots organisers, i.e. the belief in the scientific credentials of Marxism, which does not seem greatly at variance with Lenin’s claim that, “the Marxist doctrine is omnipotent because it is true. It is comprehensive and harmonious and provides men with an integral world outlook.”<sup>301</sup> Marx opposed his historical materialism with ‘ideology’, offering a dialectic interpretation of history progressing through long periods of class opposition and short bursts of revolution. The philosophical defence of these ideas throughout the history of Trotskyism (spurred on by Trotsky’s own insistence on the dialectic approach<sup>302</sup>) has given proponents the confidence to make claims to scientific truth, and an ability to explain why others disagree. We have seen that the British Trotskyist tradition outlined above only makes sense when we understand what was at stake in the often arcane theoretical disputes that fostered the factionalism which marred the work of many organisations. What was at stake in the rival interpretations of the Russian revolution (and those in China, Cuba and Eastern Europe) was the mantle of truth, and that bestowed authority on the wearer to direct the class struggle. Being in possession of the truth is clearly an enduring Marxist belief:

“The problem with being a socialist is that you know, absolutely, that you are right. You know that one-day we will be able to look back and wonder why it took so long to convince people. This can make us seem very arrogant.”<sup>303</sup>

The belief in the scientific certainty of Marxism rarely appears in such an obviously self-reflective form. However, it is one of the most striking differences with the other political perspectives present in this analysis and is required to understand the strategic repertoire utilised by the RS frame.

### ***Prospects for Revolution***

The notion of imperialism gives the RS frame an explanation of war as competition for economic power by different sections of the ruling class. The Marxist explanation relates this to the tendency of the rate of profit in enterprise to fall, the need for businesses to become ever-larger in order to expand on their profits, and the consequent need to open new markets and new bases of cheap resources (labour in

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<sup>300</sup> Marx, K., 1964, *Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy*, translated by Bottomore, T.B., (McGraw-Hill, London), p. 78.

<sup>301</sup> Lenin, quoted in Callaghan, *The Far Left*, p. 4.

<sup>302</sup> Trotsky, L., 1942, *In Defense of Marxism*, available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1942-dm/index.htm>; last accessed: 07/07/05.

<sup>303</sup> ‘Hamilton’, field notes, informal setting, June 2002.

particular). As was obvious in the movement against the 2003 Iraq war, such ideas could be massively simplified within the RS frame. Thus, the name of ‘imperialism’ often stood in for explanation, although if pressed proponents might indicate, “this huge economic crisis that’s being constantly fought off by the American government, the huge deficit they have and the precariousness of the dollar.”<sup>304</sup> However, the economic arguments here are of a different character from the kind of described with respect to the Socialist Labour League, which are criticised by some as ‘the classic case’ of ‘economic catastrophism’.<sup>305</sup> Trotsky had, in fact, made such catastrophic claims, but the ability of the advanced capitalist economy to continue on a long and relatively stable boom has enforced a rethinking of such possibilities. There are three connected results of the difficulty of the catastrophic predictions. First, it demonstrates that revolution would have to be won by struggle, and would unlikely be the result of massive economic collapse. Second, it reduces the revolutionary potential in the wealthy Western countries, increasing the draw of reformism. Third, it allows the ruling class to cope with a degree of success from reformist movements. The ‘Transitional Program’ that Trotsky drafted for the Fourth International<sup>306</sup> had made the (temporally specific) strategic claim that to support struggles for reform would be to support the revolution, because in ‘the death agony of capitalism’ even the smallest demands would show up the inability of capitalism to deliver a decent standard of living to the masses, and hence radicalise the working class into revolutionary action.

The ruling class are understood to hold structural powers (through their control of the means of coercion, and through their ideological control), and to the extent that capitalism avoids catastrophe there are no obvious weaknesses. Consequently, for revolution to be conceivable, the strength of the working class requires demonstration and affirmation; indeed one activist comments, “I certainly think that we can do whatever we want, it is in our power, in our hands to rebuild Jerusalem, to knock it down and build it again.”<sup>307</sup> The source of power of the working class is, of course, their economic position. The profits of the ruling class are understood as utterly dependent on the labour of the working class and therefore, the refusal to labour is the first tactic of the revolutionary socialist, the strike is idolised in the press and the failure to use it was seen by some as the biggest failing of the anti-war movement:

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<sup>304</sup> ‘Joe’, interview, January 2005.

<sup>305</sup> Callinicos, *Trotskyism*, p. 41.

<sup>306</sup> Fourth International, 1938, “The Transitional Program”, available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1938-tp/>; last accessed: 07/07/05.

<sup>307</sup> ‘Eldon’, interview, December 2005.

“the stop the war movement didn’t put its money where its mouth is really... [it] talked about strikes and walkouts, but it didn’t organise them. All the trade union leaders ... on paper said they wanted to stop the war, but didn’t do anything to organise their millions of members to do anything about it.”<sup>308</sup>

What is evident from this quotation is the importance placed on strong radical leaders within the trade unions. However, union politics is often labelled as ‘social democratic’, ‘democratic socialist’ or simply ‘reformist’.<sup>309</sup> Furthermore, the structural weakness of trade unions in Britain is often noted, in connection with low membership and the reduced industrial sector. This may be taken as an indication of what is, within the RS frame, the biggest hurdle to revolution: the lack of solidarity and class consciousness. The former is understood as a recognition of one’s connections with the working class both at home and abroad <sup>310</sup> while the latter is an understanding of the ‘objective’ condition of exploitation as explained above. Without these qualities, trade union activity is reduced to ‘workerism’, i.e. the fight for marginal increases of conditions of one group of workers, usually at the expense of the others. For Kara, the situation she described above was particularly galling because, “We’re only asking them to stop a bloody war, its not ‘bring down capitalism and death to the Tsars’.”<sup>311</sup>

The weakness of the unions is generally evidenced with reference to falling union membership numbers, the increase in part-time and temporary work, and the tendency of those in non-manual occupations not to see themselves as working class. There is, therefore, a central ascription of ‘false consciousness’<sup>312</sup> to the massed working class. False consciousness may be understood as a result of two distinct features of capitalist society. First, (through the ideas of Georg Lukács<sup>313</sup>) the conflation of material goods with their exchange value (i.e. commodity fetishism) disassociates the product from the labour required to produce it, and as a result, the consumer from the producer. Thus, alienation is a result of the fundamental processes of capitalism and decreases the potential for a class to become conscious of itself, as a class. Workers relate to each other through the exchange of use values, not as workers labouring together. In the less theoretical terms of activist discourse this becomes a reference to the idea that a high standard of living in the UK (largely understood a result of imperialist processes) allows

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<sup>308</sup> ‘Kara’, interview, December 2004.

<sup>309</sup> SWP, 2004, “What we Stand For: The fight for reforms gives revolutionaries their muscle” in *Socialist Worker* 1907, 26/06/04.

<sup>310</sup> ‘Hardy’, interview, December 2004.

<sup>311</sup> ‘Kara’, interview, December 2004.

<sup>312</sup> An idea that, according to [ref], was never developed in Marx’s own writings. However, Lukacs [spelling and ref] development of ‘class consciousness’ has clearly had lasting influence.

<sup>313</sup> Lukács, G., 1971, *History and Class Consciousness : Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, translated by Livingstone, R., (Merlin Press, London).

people to live in comfortable apathy, without recognising either their lack of control over their own lives or their connection to the poor at home or abroad. In the latter formation, this idea element can appear very similar to the critique from other movement strands (found particularly in the RL frame) that the wealth of those in the rich world is predicated on the poverty of others, although its roots are notably different.

The second process involved in ‘false consciousness’, identified primarily in the work of Antonio Gramsci,<sup>314</sup> is ideological hegemony. As alluded to earlier, social institutions within capitalism – education, media, culture – are understood to reinforce capitalist values and hide the true nature of exploitation. Again this reduces the potential of the development of a class consciousness of itself, and therefore of the power it has as a result of its structural location. The division of the working class through discrimination based on race, religion, gender and sexuality must, for the Trotskyist, fall under this heading. Such divisions, which are clearly much easier to fit into the news format than their theoretical expositions, are most likely to feature in the far-left press, with the blame for these divisions placed on capitalists implying some level of hegemonic power. Again, this notion of capitalists’ ‘divide and rule’ offers the possibility of connections with other streams in the current wave of contention as it offers a way of criticising, from within the RS frame, oppressions that are not immediately located in the economic structure of society. While the current wave is not primarily characterised by the identity-based politics that is associated with the ‘new social movements’, it has nevertheless brought the claims of those movements centrally within its ambit. As we saw above, Trotskyist organisations have historically struggled with non-class claims of oppression but the value of this argument in making connections with the wider movements has given it a high profile within the RS frame.<sup>315</sup>

Class struggle - the competition between those whose power and privilege is based on exploitation and expropriation and those whose power is based on their vital role in production - is understood as a clash of interests. It is in the interests of the ruling class to hold onto their power and privilege; this is simply axiomatic within the RS frame as

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<sup>314</sup> Gramsci, A., 1971, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, edited and translated by Hoare, Q. & Nowell Smith, G., (Lawrence and Wishart, London).

<sup>315</sup> Several articles from the SWP’s “Where we Stand” column, for instance, utilise arguments about the division of the working class in this way: SWP, 2004, “Rights of the Oppressed to Organise Their Own Defence” in *Socialist Worker* 1893, 20/03/04; “Real Equality for Gays and Lesbians is Still to be Won” in *Socialist Worker* 1898, 24/04/04; “Oppose All Barriers that Divide Workers” in *Socialist Worker* 1889, 21/02/04; “What is the Real Case for Socialist Revolution?” in *Socialist Worker* 1886, 31/01/04.

within Marxism. The implications of this axiom spin off in various directions. It has an impact, for instance, on the conception of the individual as what the individual ought to do is predicated on what is in the interest of the class as a whole. However, by far the most important implication is that it grounds the need for revolution: members of the ruling class will act in the interests of the class as a whole (and thus it is assumed that they have a level of class consciousness not found in the contemporary British working class) and therefore they will not give up their position without struggle. This is most clearly seen in expectation of violence:

“by the time I was 16 I realised that I was a revolutionary, on the simple grounds that I could see clearly that fundamental change would require overcoming the resistance of people who don’t want to see that change”<sup>316</sup>

“they will not go quietly. They will get the army... All the world’s history says that when the ruling class is seriously threatened by its own people they react. In a big way.”<sup>317</sup>

“You cannot chip away at capitalism hoping to build a new society; after a while capitalism will respond, ‘No more chipping!’ and repress that attempt”<sup>318</sup>

“The vile Mexican ruling class is permitting the Zapatistas - for the moment - to remain in control of indigenous areas of south Mexico, only because the Zapatistas have promised not to promote revolution across Mexico. However, the economic, social and political emancipation of the oppressed and exploited peasants and workers of Chiapas can only be secured through such a revolution.”<sup>319</sup>

I quote at length to emphasise the importance of this conception of revolution. ‘Eldon’ (first quotation) tends to be critical of Trotskyist organisations, and is not a member, yet the notion of revolution has guided several decades of thought and action. ‘Hardy’ (second quotation) is an SWP member, and (on this matter) follows the standard SWP line: revolution is necessary because the ruling class will not give up their power voluntarily. A result of this notion is that social change cannot be built piecemeal, this means that attempts at reform are not capable of accumulatively bringing in a socialist society and thus forms a part of the argument against a range of other movement streams (third quotation, from a member of Workers’ Power). Finally, this idea is utilised to understand the meaning of particular political events and situations (fourth quotation). The Zapatistas are celebrated within much of the movement produced literature, and the writings of its charismatic leader, Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos have aided the identification of neo-liberalism as its enemy. However, it is

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<sup>316</sup> ‘Eldon’, interview, February 2005.

<sup>317</sup> ‘Hardy’, interview, December 2004.

<sup>318</sup> ‘Hamilton’, field notes, informal setting, June 2002

<sup>319</sup> ‘Gareth’, email to public discussion list, May 2002

primarily within streams that emphasise autonomy (which the DA frame exemplifies) that the EZLN struggle is affirmatively evaluated, whereas those that emphasise the permanent revolution can only understand it as limited. This is a very clear example of how the content of orientational frames with a basis in a longer tradition, give rise to particular understandings of particular situations.

### ***Organising Revolution: the Variable Role of Democracy***

“the central point of Marxism is that from below we can create new structures, structures that have to be democratic, have to be based on mass self-emancipation, self-activity, but have to be centralised and have at some decisive point to disarm the ruling class before they kill us.”<sup>320</sup>

This view, from a central thinker in the SWP, highlights the expectation of violence in revolution just described. The idea of a militia is frequently connected with the notion of democratic self-rule by the working class. However, the details of militia activities, other than that officers would be directly elected and accountable, is very rarely made explicit and it certainly appears that these concerns are seen to be somewhat distant, given the present understanding of the very low revolutionary potential within the British working class.<sup>321</sup> For this reason I will focus, in this section, on the tension between democracy and centralisation to which the above quotation is primarily orientated. The notion of democracy is a particularly complex one in the RS frame, and its meaning and evaluation appear to shift through the various historical stages that are expected in the progress towards socialism. Progress is understood, at the more theoretical level, with reference to dialectical materialism as adumbrated above. For this reason, it is not necessarily inconsistent to have a number of different conceptions of democracy, dependent on the historical circumstances. However, we will see that to the extent to which the orientational frame employed by activists floats free of the complex theoretical understandings of Marxist ideology, there is great potential for confusion and conflict.

Revolutionary socialists claim not to be utopian, in the sense that they do not have a blueprint for the ideal society. The revolution is conceived as such a break from the

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<sup>320</sup> Chris Harman, contributing to a debate between Alex Callinicos and John Holloway, 2005, “Can We Change the World Without Taking Power?” at WSF V; transcript in *International Socialism* 106. Available at: <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=98&issue=106>; last accessed: 07/08/05.

<sup>321</sup> A notable exception to that is the level of planning that some Trotskyist groups put into mass demonstrations. The ambition to ‘get into the red zone’, referring to an area cordoned off by police at the Prague IMF/World Bank conference, was articulated and planned. Elsewhere, activists have commented on ‘de-arrest’ training in order to physically release comrades in the process of being arrested; ‘Hamilton’, field notes, discussion at anti-war university occupation, October 2002.

capitalist present, altering the consciousnesses of all involved to such a degree,<sup>322</sup> that “we cannot ... specify the details of a socialist society, we would limit ourselves to a statement of general principles ... its in the guiding star this, decisions can, should and must be taken by everybody.”<sup>323</sup> Nevertheless, at times there is further specification, where democracy appears in a form markedly similar to the soviets that appeared during 1917 in Russia, wherein:

“councils of workers' delegates ... based on elected delegates from the work places and the neighbourhoods will become the ultimate decision-making body in society... they will be organs of direct democracy whose delegates can be recalled by the electors. Combining political and economic functions, workers' councils will allow direct participation in the running of society by the working masses.”<sup>324</sup>

This post-revolutionary endpoint provides an image of an ideal form of democracy which informs the thought of those utilising the RS frame. However, as we shall see shortly, this does not necessarily inform practice in the pre-revolutionary context.

Within the RS frame liberal representative democracy is described as ‘bourgeois democracy’. Theoretically, this is because of Marx’s description of the progress of history requiring first a bourgeois revolution, overthrowing the aristocracy in order to create capitalism before the socialist revolution becomes possible.<sup>325</sup> The label serves far more often to indicate that democracy in capitalist society will work to the benefit of the powerful, because it is not fundamentally constituted of the direct participation of the working class and because the economy is largely outside of the control of the democratically elected representatives in any case. As a result, the most positive revolutionary socialist approach to British democracy is that, “Parliament is a dungheap. But if you stand on top of it, your voice carries further. A socialist who is elected as an MP (or a councillor) wins a megaphone which is useful for socialist agitation. It doesn't make parliament any less of a dungheap.”<sup>326</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that both bourgeois democracy and the socialist ideal of democracy involve representation is an important parallel and highlights a major source of contention between the RS and DA frames. Possibly in reaction to this debate, the notion of

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<sup>322</sup> SWP, “What we Stand For: What is the Real Case for the Socialist Revolution” in *Socialist Worker* 1886, 31/01/04.

<sup>323</sup> ‘Hardy’, interview, December 2004.

<sup>324</sup> IST, *Where We Stand*.

<sup>325</sup> Trotsky’s position was different, the notion of permanent revolution explicitly claims that bourgeois revolution can develop immediately into a socialist revolution, as was thought to have happened in Russia.

<sup>326</sup> SWP, “What we stand for: Can't we win change through parliament?” in *Socialist Worker* 1883, 10/01/04. Also, IST, *Where We Stand*.

immediate recall of representatives is often highlighted as an essential aspect of democracy.<sup>327</sup>

If the extent of the claims about democracy in post-revolutionary society are limited by an unwillingness to specify too much in advance, and the representative democracy of the state in the present is understood as fundamentally flawed then we must look to the process that stretches from the consciousness raising activities of the present, through the revolution to find the understanding of democracy that is central to the everyday thought and practise within the RS frame. What we find here is a commitment to democratic centralism. The Trotskyist organisations stress the need for strong central leadership and party discipline. In the ‘What we stand for’ column in *Socialist Worker*, the centralist element is reduced to this: “There’s a key principle involved in democracy. Once a plan of action has been debated and decided, we should stick to it. That doesn’t just apply to parties, but also to movements. An anarchistic “do your own thing” mentality produces unnecessary defeats.”<sup>328</sup> In the context of a broad movement that includes significant streams with a position of direct, non-representative democracy, it is clear that this statement is aimed as distinguishing the revolutionary position. In addition, it is directed toward maintaining party discipline, a theme that is echoed in a number of internal documents and in the practice of Trotskyist organising; centralism is justified on the basis of effectiveness. What is left unspoken here, is the commitment to hierarchy. Centralism within the Trotskyist tradition, as we have seen, includes a willingness to defer to higher levels of authority, especially to the various ‘Internationals’. The international bodies have used a variety of means, but particularly the expulsion of national sections and denial of funding, in order to enforce their will. However, while the belief in the efficiency of centralism by those working on the ground is vital to the functioning of Trotskyist organisations as they are currently constituted, it is unclear whether this should be counted among the key traits of the RS frame. After all, there are undoubtedly revolutionary socialists who are either not members of Trotskyist organisations, or whose membership does not limit them from ‘going it alone’ in some elements of their activism.

A related, but more central notion is the idea of the vanguard party. I described, in the first section of this chapter, the commonality of history that a number of Trotskyist organisations share, from low-key tactics of entryism and united front action, to a

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<sup>327</sup> ‘Hardy’, interview, December 2004.

<sup>328</sup> SWP, “What we Stand For: Democracy without Centralism Will Fail” in *Socialist Worker* 1902, 22/05/04. Similarly, the SWP constitution notes, “we need to act in a unified way. Once decisions have been taken, all members are expected to carry out party policies”; SWP, *Post-Conference Bulletin*, December 2004.

declaration of their own importance as the ‘vanguard of the proletariat’. ‘Hardy’ explained that inside his guiding star was the idea, “most of all, you must build a tight knit organisation at the centre, this organisation is not the mass movement, but it should be at the centre of the mass movement.”<sup>329</sup> The purposes of such an organisation are to protect, develop and pass on the truth found in their interpretation of Marxism, and to be at the centre of revolutionary struggle.<sup>330</sup> Ultimately, given the position of the Russian revolution as *the* example in revolutionary socialism, the vanguard must be understood as the kernel of the workers’ state in the period of transition between revolution and ‘true’ communism. At this point the revolution is understood to be potentially under attack both from capitalist nation-states and from counter-revolutionary forces and therefore the transition needs guiding from a strong central government, which is destined to ‘whither away’.

While not including democracy as one of the five ‘core’ elements of socialism, Michael Freeden nevertheless notes the importance of the concept. The centrality of equality together with the overriding importance of the community (class) over the individual suggest that “authoritarian variants which emerged within the socialist tradition, those which assent to the role of elites of talent or of organizational capacity as well as those which remain cemented to functional dictatorships of the proletariat, however ephemeral their life-span was originally envisaged, have distanced themselves from socialist ideological structures.”<sup>331</sup> With a history of deep conflict with Stalinism, Trotskyists stress the necessity of ‘bottom-up’ structures to allow the self-emancipation of the working class. It is this, together with the need to distance themselves from authoritarian socialism, that provides a focus on democracy. Yet, in the present, the vanguard parties see themselves in the role of protecting the Marxist truth, while attempting to increase the number of people who follow the same revolutionary understanding; i.e. an educative role. The vanguard is justified, along with democratic centralism, by the need for efficient and effective decision making in the revolutionary situation: “on a snap decision may hang the fate of the entire revolution. What is needed is a cool and clear head, a firm sense of the ultimate objective, the ability to make rapid tactical judgements, and an organisation capable not only of making decisions, but of carrying them out.”<sup>332</sup> The commitment to Marxism as science ensures that none of the central beliefs of the vanguard are available for negotiation, and this creates the tension with democracy in the RS frame. Their relationship with other

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<sup>329</sup> ‘Hardy’, interview, December 2004.

<sup>330</sup> ‘Floyd’, field notes, informal setting, October 2002.

<sup>331</sup> Freeden, *Ideologies...*, p. 439.

<sup>332</sup> Callinicos, A., 1986, *The Revolutionary Road to Socialism*, (Socialist Workers Party), p. 46.

streams within the current cycle of contention, let alone with the trade union movement they classify as reformist, cannot be, therefore, a relationship of equals. The realm of debate is absolutely limited by the Trotskyist tradition and a narrow amount of flexibility in interpreting ‘classical Marxism’.

Members of the working class, i.e. anyone who works for a wage or salary, who do not subscribe to the Marxist doctrine are ascribed the quality of false consciousness. This does not *necessarily* conflict with democracy as normally understood, as the process of democracy should have some deliberative and educative elements through which the presentation of Trotskyist ideas, if true, convince workers of the Trotskyist case. However, as the history of the organisations demonstrate, the commitment to democracy either internally, or in their dealings with broader movements is a fragile one indeed. There are practical and theoretical problems here, discussion of which will offer the opportunity for advancing our understanding of the connections between the key components of the RS frame as it is currently composed.

Practically, the application of democracy as educative and deliberative process lacks an obvious location. On the one hand, bourgeois democracy is understood simply as another arm of capitalist hegemony; radical ideas do not get a fair hearing. Within revolutionary organisations, on the other hand, it might be argued members have already achieved a level of consciousness sufficient for action, and there is simply no point in deliberating at length. The revolutionary organisation is, after all, supposed to be oriented to revolutionary action: the epithet ‘talking shop’ is pejoratively applied to any organisation that has focused on deliberation at the expense of action.<sup>333</sup> The engagement of Trotskyists within larger movements and organisations does provide a space in which political discussion may take place with individuals who are likely already to have developed some level of critique of capitalist relationships. But here exist a number of tensions that could allow deliberation to fall by the wayside. Most simply, coalitions forming around particular issues or instances are likely to involve many ‘old hands’ who have been confronted with the Trotskyist world-view before and rejected it. Additionally, they are likely to be oriented to urgent forms of action producing again the need to avoid becoming a ‘talking shop’. Most tellingly, the perceived superiority of the Trotskyist analysis encourages an attempt to dominate coalitional groups, simply because of the necessity of acting in the ‘right’ way.

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<sup>333</sup> The need to avoid ‘becoming a talking shop’ structured much of the initial development of the Sheffield Social Forum, as I will demonstrate in chapter eight, due largely to the input of Workers’ Power members ‘Kara’ and ‘Gareth’ and SWP organiser ‘Floyd’.

Theoretically, what we can detect here is an important difference between the justifications of democracy on offer from the various orientational frameworks within contemporary movement milieu. For the Trotskyist the importance of democracy flows from the (more central) notions of equality and community. The latter insists that - given the sociability at the base of human nature - it is societies, groups and classes rather than individuals that should be the basis of our decision making. That is, we should act in a way that is good for the group as a whole, rather than any one or other of its members. However, the value of equality should temper the potential of utilitarian calculations that might produce decisions requiring the (large) sacrifice of the one for the (small) good of the many. Acting as a group (particularly in the context of shared ownership of the means of production) requires regular group decision making and equality suggests that no one must be excluded from that decision making. This is markedly different from the conceptions of democracy we will see attached to the other orientational frames identified in this thesis. Both take a very much more individualist conception of the value of democracy. The notion of equality itself, in the RS frame, can be overridden for the good of the group, and where the individual has 'reactionary', 'reformist' or 'revisionist' views it is always possible to argue that the good of the class is absolutely primary.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The historical outline of the development of British Trotskyism presented in the first section of this chapter demonstrates a tradition of thought and action that is still influential in the UK today. The classical Marxism carried by revolutionary organizations has a number of central elements that appear virtually unchanged in the contemporary movement context: the class analysis of capitalist exploitation; the value placed on human welfare and power equality; the necessity of the revolutionary road to socialism; the integration of politics and economics; the debilitating effects of (Gramscian) hegemonic ideology; and the belief in the vanguard party practicing a united front strategy all appear to have been transmitted faithfully to the present. All retain centrality in the orientational frame that guides the thought and action of a significant section of the current movements. Underlying all of these elements are found a theoretical belief in the primacy of the society over the individual and an attitude of certainty that colours activist interpretation and praxis in the current movements. These elements are less likely to appear in grassroots activist discourse, and play a less prominent role in even the theoretical literature attached to the Trotskyist organisations. Nevertheless, the relative positions of the other elements require these underlying assumptions for the frame to have coherence. These elements

alone offer a specification of the RS frame that is, as we would expect, much more specific than Freedman's ideological analysis with which I began this chapter.

To draw out only the most stable elements in the frame would, however, be to miss out an important part of the story, and would make a genuine understanding of this stream within the ideas of the contemporary movements very difficult. The RS frame is, I suggest, relatively closed to innovation, venerating its theoretical and activist forebears. Conversely, the focus on party-building, in order to spread the truths perceived in the core beliefs in the frame, forces those working within the RS frame to look to wider movements; to live up to their philosophy they must attempt to connect with those who have not yet gained a revolutionary understanding. The conversations with broader movements have brought about a number of (more or less durable) changes, developing what we can now see as the RS frame. First, the definition of the working class has undoubtedly been widened. Second, the notion of democracy has gained in importance, at least within the rhetoric of the frame. And, third, the orientation of the struggle has turned from primarily focusing on the struggles of those in industrial workplaces for better pay and conditions to spread focus out among the multiple movements that have, since the mid-1990s come to see themselves as a 'movement of movements'. These shifts may all be understood as responses to changes in the political opportunity structure, broadly conceived. The new cycle of contention seemed to offer up a new generation of radical activists, whose politics was not based on the narrow identity claims associated with the 'new social movements'. For Trotskyist organisations languishing, in part, because of the numerical and political weakness of the trade union movement since the failure of the 1984-5 miners' strike, this was a much needed opportunity for a fresh burst of political activity. Furthermore, the new mobilisations were targeted at international economic institutions: the control centres of capital. While much of the movement understood itself to be anti-neo-liberal the revolutionary socialist could interpret this as an anti-capitalist movement.

The vanguard parties in twenty-first century Britain cannot survive long without exploiting the potential of these radical movements as recruiting grounds. But more importantly, it is the very nature of the vanguard, which must be understood (within the RS frame) as a carrier of ideas that requires activists to reach out to other politically active sections of the population. The movements had largely internalised the claims made by the 'new social movements', and were centred organisationally around a non-representative notion of democracy. In these two areas, therefore, the revolutionary socialists have shifted the emphasis of their rhetoric. In terms of identity claims (claims to non-class oppressions) the shift appears to have been wholly genuine. Activists have been able to make sense of these oppressions as grounds for struggle within the

revolutionary socialist frame. It is also in the nature of the vanguard to attempt to dominate a movement in terms of attempting to set its strategy; this appears as a central idea in the revolutionary socialist tradition. This suggests that, in fact, involvement in the movement is not purely motivated by the ambition of party building but because the vanguard parties see there to be potential in the struggle, if only it is appropriately guided down the revolutionary road. However, it is here that the central tension within the RS frame is created. In continuing to highlight the gap between Trotskyism and Stalinism there has been an increase in discussion of democracy as a 'bottom-up' force. But the requirements of centralism, and leadership of the broader movement act against this rhetoric: the bells of democracy ring hollow when struck against the practice of domination.