

“The Lesson of the Soviet Union Is that the Bureaucracy Chooses Capitalist Restoration”

An Interview

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Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Wilder Pérez Varona (WPV): My first question to you is about the issue of bureaucracy.

Before 1917 the issue of the socialist transition is one thing. The 1848 Revolution, the Paris Commune (which is a crucial episode, but of a momentary nature) were always limited to matters of theory, principles, projections (we know that Marx and Engels were reluctant to be very detailed about these projections). The Revolution of 1917 placed this problem of transition in another way, on to a different level; a level that involved essentially practical elements. One of them involved the issue of bureaucracy, which gradually appeared throughout the 1920s. On the issue of bureaucracy as it was being developed in those circumstances, how do you define the function of bureaucracy by according it an autonomous role of such a relevant actor at the level of the class triad: the working class / peasantry and the bourgeoisie? Why this important place? I would also like you to say something on the distinctness of “class”. You are cautious to talk about the bureaucracy as a class; however, other authors do.

Eric Toussaint (ET): Well, it is clear that the Russian experience and then that of the Soviet Union is, I would say, almost the second experience of attempting to take power to begin a transition to break away from capitalism. The first experience, the Paris Commune, lasted three months in 1871, was as such limited to the boundaries of Paris, isolated from French territory and attacked. So, it is clear that revolutionaries like Lenin, Trotsky, and other leaders of the Bolshevik Party had no other experiences as a point of reference and conceived the problem of transition, as I mentioned in my presentation,[1] in a triangular manner, that is, the need for an alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry to defeat the bourgeoisie and imperialism, and to resist imperialist aggression after the seizure of power.

And the issue of something like the subsistence and weight of the Tsarist state apparatus, which had a bureaucracy, and so the fight against bureaucracy and bureaucratism was rather conceived at the beginning as a struggle against something that was part of the past, of the Tsarist heritage. Within the framework of the development of the transition, from the first years, both Lenin and Trotsky and others were faced with a new problem that they had to start analysing and specifying, etc. Lenin did not manage to develop, I would say, a theory of bureaucracy because he died in January 1924, but what is absolutely true in the case of Lenin is that he, in several very clear and important interventions, complained about the bureaucratic deformation of the workers' state in construction. Already in the debate on the unions in 1920-1921 he said that the workers state led by the Bolshevik Party had bureaucratic deformations and, therefore, the workers and their unions have to maintain a certain level of independence from the bureaucratically deformed workers state. That seems

very important to me.

Another aspect of Lenin's position at the end of 1922 and the beginning of 1923 is found in his criticism of an institution created by the same government, called the People's Commissariat of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate (Rabkrin). Lenin said that this institution, which was supposed to serve in the fight against bureaucratism and where each citizen (proletarian or peasant) could go and complain about the bureaucratic behaviours, was itself totally bureaucratized. And that institution which had twelve thousand officials was directed by Joseph Stalin. Lenin proposed its complete reform. So, the People's Commissariat of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate which was supposed to fight against bureaucracy, actually helped bureaucratization and aggravated the problem in which the bureaucratically deformed workers' state already found itself. It should also be mentioned, because it is little known, that Stalin did everything necessary to make it disappear publicly or even to prevent the public knowledge of Lenin's letters saying that Stalin should be removed from the post of Party Secretary General.

That is in reference to Lenin. So, I said in my presentation that the problem of the transition to socialism was not limited to the bourgeoisie / proletariat / peasantry triangle, but there was a fourth actor which is the bureaucracy. And, the bureaucracy was not limited to being a legacy of the past – in Russia's case of the Tsarist past – but emerged within the process of transition and consolidated itself as an actor that gradually gained confidence, in the course of the transition, of own its interests, and its interests (in the case of the Russian experience) began drifting away from the interests of both the proletariat and the peasantry and, in a way, the bourgeoisie. That is to say, the bureaucracy did not consciously aim for the restoration of capitalism and the power of the bourgeoisie. The bureaucracy was not, I would say, an aid to the capitalist restoration, but pursued its own interests and in that case its own interests were to have a monopoly of political power and use the state apparatus to direct, lead the process and, in some way, transform the party into an instrument of the bureaucracy, transform the unions into a transmission belt of bureaucratic power to the rank and file and have an economic development in which the proletariat and the peasantry can not really act in defence of their own interests, but begin to be (in the case of Russia) exploited by the bureaucracy. The bureaucracy headed by Stalin not only promoted a level of authoritarianism, but also of dictatorship over the working people of both the rural and the industrial sector or other state-controlled economic sectors.

But of course, the bureaucracy did not create a new ideology. The bureaucracy did not assert bourgeois ideology because it was officially being fought. So, the bureaucracy, in general, took the "official" socialist programme as an ideological garb and as a programme. It spoke in the name of deepening the process of building a socialist society as the bureaucracy did not create its own ideology. The latter would have implied distancing itself from the official program of the revolution. Somehow the bureaucracy operated underhandedly with its own interests. It could destroy both organizations and people who really wanted a deepening of the process. It could destroy them by officially resorting to the "defence of socialism".

In the course of the 1920s, leaders like Christian Rakovsky, an important Bolshevik leader, revolutionary, and then Trotsky, began to understand the specificity of the bureaucracy (Christian Rakovsky, *The "Professional Dangers" of Power*, August 1928, (see [this](#)). It took years to really understand what it was and in 1935 while writing the book, *The Revolution Betrayed* (see [this](#)), Trotsky arrives at a complete elaboration of the analysis of a bureaucratic state not only deformed, but degenerated. That is to say, the ties that those in

power of the Soviet Union had with the revolution in 1935 had totally distanced themselves from those of the first years. There remained a society that was no more capitalist, there were no capitalists in the Soviet Union, but the process towards socialism, which implies democracy, workers control, forms of self-management, independent and free cultural expression, possibility of debate among revolutionaries, open debates – all had been totally degraded and destroyed and there were no more these scopes. That is why Trotsky calling for a political revolution said that it was not so much a social revolution against property relations in the productive sector, it was not a revolution of the anti-capitalist type with social characteristics. A political revolution is necessary to allow the proletariat, the peasantry, all the workers who produce wealth, and the people in general, to regain political power. Hence the term “political revolution”. Hence the demands that are mainly political: freedom of expression, freedom of organization, worker control, self-management, pluralism of parties respecting the constitution.

Trotsky also launched a debate on extending the revolution or not. What good does it do? What is the purpose of the Communist International? Trotsky advocated the extension of the revolution to the international level and for permanent revolution. It is necessary to remember that a Communist International had been built, the 3rd International founded in 1919, then led by Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Radek (Stalin at the beginning of the Communist International had no real presence, was not a leader known internationally to head the process of extending the revolution). It was only when Stalin succeeds in expelling Trotsky from the Communist Party in 1927 and expelling him from the country in 1929 that he begins to fully lead the Stalinised Third International and puts that International at the service of the interests of the very bureaucracy of the Soviet Union, and no longer to really extend the revolution internationally.

WPV: And despite the fact that the bureaucracy does not create its own ideology, nevertheless in practice (after the historical evolution of the so-called “real socialisms”), it actually managed the capitalist restoration in those countries. You also pointed out that they exploited the classes of peasants and workers, of producers in general. How do you, then, distinguish that bureaucratic management and exploitation with respect to capitalist exploitation; between the one carried out by the bureaucracy and the bourgeoisie?

ET: During that long period of bureaucratic rule, the same bureaucracy considered that the conditions were not yet ripe to shift to a process in which – as a social layer – it is transformed into a class for the private accumulation of wealth. Which is, I would say, typical of the capitalist class: a private accumulation of wealth.

But at the same time the lesson of the Soviet Union is that, after all, that bureaucracy that is not building a new type of system chooses the capitalist restoration and the bureaucrats themselves become capitalists. That is to say, in some way, they pass the frontier as a social layer and transform themselves into a capitalist class. As bureaucrats, before the capitalist restoration, they can accumulate levels of wealth, privileges, etc., but their privileges come from the management of a society in which large private property, the capitalist property, does not exist or is totally marginal and that does not have a great future. But it can last for decades till the given moment when the social layer (or a part, a fraction of the social layer) decides that it is time to restore capitalism. This is what happened in the late eighties and early nineties of the last century in the Soviet Union. Personally, I think that is what happened in China after the Deng Xiaoping reforms in the late eighties as well, and in Vietnam we also had such evolution.

Of course, the historical perspective could have been different, that is, a capacity of the producers (proletariat, peasantry or intellectual worker) to regain power through a political revolution, but that did not happen and it was not Gorbachev's perspective. He spoke of *Glasnot*, in terms of freedom of political debates, but *Perestroika* was already introducing reforms in favour of progressive capitalist restoration. So that is the great challenge for a transitional society: how to face the problem of bureaucratisation and the consolidation of the bureaucracy as a dominant social layer in the leadership. Moreover, when the country is isolated, and has problems to really increase production, increase its endogenous development, and respond to the needs of workers.

WPV: To a large extent all the reforms of the 1980s were also made with the slogan of the democratisation of bureaucratised socialism. However, the history of the relationship between socialism and democracy has involved many conflicts, many contradictions, many misunderstandings ...

ET: It is extremely complicated because (you know perfectly well in Cuba) the transition to socialism leads imperialism to a policy of aggression that can take various forms. Therefore, this aggressive attitude makes it complicated to have a total freedom of expression within the framework of the process. The same aggression produces reactions of limitation of expression, and so on; but of course, at any given moment the bureaucracy uses the external threat to keep political debates limited because it is not really interested to let people have political debates that could weaken their bureaucratic control over society.

So, the issue is very complex. I would say that it is clear that we have to face an external aggression that can take various forms, but we cannot, under this situation of aggression, limit in an exaggerated way the possibility of expression, of organisation, of protests, and so on.

In my presentation I made reference to Rosa Luxemburg, who fully supported the Bolshevik Revolution. As you know, she was murdered in January 1919 under orders of German Social Democratic ministers. In 1918 she wrote several letters to the Bolsheviks, which she made public, to tell "Comrades Lenin, Trotsky, beware of the measures that you are taking to limit the political liberties", etc., because that can lead to a process that is going to be fatal for the Soviet revolution. I would say, what is the balance that we must find in the transition? And in that perspective we must also evaluate the attitude of Lenin, Trotsky and others ...? What happened with Kronstadt, the sailors' rebellion near Petrograd? What happened to the secret police (the *Cheka*), which had the possibility of extrajudicial execution processes, imprisonment of opponents? ... the issue of trade unions? It is clear that we must be able to analyse this.

For us it is also important to analyse what happened in a country like Cuba. The whole libertarian issue in the 1960s in Cuba, then followed by the increase of the negative influence of the USSR bureaucracy from the economic difficulties after the 1970 harvest. We have to analyse and also draw lessons from the Cuban experience. It is also very important.

WPV: Of course we have to analyse the processes in their particular contexts, but we must also take into account certain limits in the prerogatives of the revolutionary government itself, let's say, to assume the direction and control of the process. In this link between socialism and democracy, you are in favour of a dimensioning of democracy. In other words, it is not just democracy, it is not the democracy that has been hegemonised by capitalist perspectives, but a limited democracy (socialist or of any other kind, a workers' democracy).

ET: For example, for me one of the lessons of the Russian experience is the need for a multi-party system saying that, within the framework of the transition, the existence of several parties should be allowed if they accept, respect, the socialist, workers' constitution. In the transitional society towards socialism, one can not allow a pro-imperialist party calling for outside intervention, or supporting foreign intervention, or let it freely organize, recruit and prepare a pro-imperialist strategy. But there may be different parties, which have different visions of the transition, and which may coexist; and the people must be able, thanks to their political training and its development, to choose between several options. Of course, debates must be promoted and consultations convened on decisions to be taken.

I would also say that one of the lessons of the so-called societies with "real socialism" of the twentieth century is that, and it seems to me fundamental, at the economic level they must have an important sector of private economy, small private property. The small private property of land, the small private property of workshops, restaurants, shops. The Soviet experience also had an influence on Cuba, nationalising almost everything at any given moment, which damaged the process. I was here in 1993 when the freedom for self-employed to pursue their activities was announced and it seemed to me to be a good measure or the peasant free markets where peasants can come to the city and sell their products. That space should have been maintained in the Soviet Union, where the forced collectivisation imposed by Stalin from 1929 was a disaster, and had tremendous consequences on agriculture. That is to say, there is the question of political democracy, but also for me there must be a differentiation of statutes of producers and small private production, and small private property or private initiative must be guaranteed during the process.

In the case of China, Vietnam and the Soviet Union, which disappeared in 1991, followed by the Russian Federation, Ukraine, etc., there were no limits put on private property leading to a restoration of large private capitalist property. And bureaucrats or friends of the bureaucrats transformed themselves into oligarchs and accumulated tremendous wealth as new capitalists, even very aggressive towards the workers and robbing the nation of a large part of the wealth generated by the producers.

So the debate is not just about democracy, it is also about economic reforms and the social content of economic reforms.

WPV: *On the question of limits to the market, the limits to private enterprise, in these socialist experiences (including Cuba) the discussion has often turned in terms of the Plan / Market relationship. In other words, to what extent the centrally planned state must intervene, must limit the expansion of the market. However, it is presupposed that there must be a central Plan; in general, it is something implicit, something that is not questioned. In relation to this, it can be assumed that the plan thus conceived is also one of the most effective instruments available to the bureaucracy, what is your opinion on the matter?*

ET: I remember discussions in Cuba about the role of the market, etc., for example the debate that took place when Che was Minister of Industry.[2] In the 1990s the discussions about the role of the market came back, I remember very well, I was invited to all the events on globalisation between 1998 and 2008-2009. Fidel [Castro] participated in all the events that lasted three, four days, in the Palacio de las Convenciones with thousand or thousand two hundred Cuban and foreign guests, Fidel on several occasions asked exactly about the role of the market and the limits to be set to the market.[3]

Personally, my answer is as follows. It is fundamental to allow and support the small private initiative, the small agricultural production, which may even be a majority but small, that is, a majority of peasant families producing most of the agricultural production. It is one of the incentives to increase production and achieve food sovereignty, to also improve their standard of living thanks to increased production with the sale of more products, it is a powerful incentive to achieve a high level of production and quality because the farmer knows that if he does not produce quality products he will not be able to sell them on the market or to the state.

So, I think that at that level there were serious errors in the conduct of the agricultural policy of many countries called socialist, where they wanted to nationalise or impose cooperatives that were not really efficient. But, at the same time, for me, planning is fundamental and I would tell you that in modern economies it is even more important. Let's imagine for a moment a socialist revolution in Europe or the United States. Planning is fundamental, how can you imagine the fight against climate change, if you are not planning to put an end to power stations with coal, oil or gas, and change it for forms of renewable energy? That has to be planned, because it is not the local communities, the families, who can make that decision, because the production of energy at this time is on a large scale. Therefore, combating climate change has a relationship with what I said about family production using organic methods of agricultural production, in order to combat climate change or to limit the effects of ecological crisis that is already underway.

So, planning is important. The issue is how to ensure that the people, the citizens, can influence decisions about planning. And for me the answer is in any way, it can happen through the internet, the media we have, television, and so on. Several options can be presented to the people to arrive at a decision, if we take such an option we can foresee that it will have such consequences on their living conditions, if we take another option, it would have these negative effects; allow the debate on these options, and at a given moment, that people pronounce on options taking into considerations the priorities of the Five-Year Plan, for the decade, and so on.

For me the lesson of the so-called socialist experiences of the last century, is that it was a planning led by bureaucratic apparatuses that decided what was the most interesting and imposed priorities. On the contrary, it would have been necessary to discuss different options. So for me it is not necessary to finish with the planning, it is necessary to democratise the planning.

We need a new socialist, self-managed, ecologist, socialist, feminist option. We have to advocate for that perspective.

WPV: Returning, finally, to the setting of the event, which has been the opportunity to interview you, what does it mean for you to hold in Cuba this international event about Trotsky? What importance do you attach to dialoguing about Trotsky today?

ET: This conference about Trotsky is a very positive initiative for me. It is an academic conference, not a forum for political organizations to recruit, but a debate on many different aspects of the writings, contribution and struggle of Leon Trotsky. During the conference the struggle of Trotsky against the bureaucracy, the struggle for the extension of the revolution, the struggle to face the external aggression was analysed. Trotsky was the head of the Red Army who managed to defeat the counter-revolution and external aggression in 1919-1920 in Soviet Russia, we must not forget it. Trotsky's contributions on the problems of daily life,

his contributions on literature, culture (it was an important subject in this conference), the reality of the Soviet society of the twenties were also analysed during the conference ...

And, why is it important to do it in Cuba? Because Cuba is, I would say, the only country of what were called “socialist countries” where capitalism has not been restored. There is a fundamental debate for Cuba on how, taking into account the lessons of the last century, the internal struggles in the Soviet Union between the 1920s and 1930s, on the one hand; and the recent experiences of capitalist restoration in Russia, in China, and in other countries, how to position themselves as Cubans, in a sovereign way, and direct the way to the future. Of course it is complicated because the external aggression continues. We have Trump, who is restricting the small space that had been opened during Obama’s mandate for Cuba, which was somewhat limited but indicated an opening. Now with Trump they are closing spaces again.

As an internationalist, I have always supported the Cuban revolution, I have supported the fight against the blockade imposed on Cuba. And to see that there is a space in Cuba to rethink Trotsky’s contribution, the meaning that this contribution can have in today’s debates in Cuba, is a joy for me. There are dozens of comrades here who are revolutionaries in their countries, who may have different positions, different visions of Trotskyism, there are of course different visions of Marxism, different visions of Leninism, Fidelismo, Guevarism, there is not just one vision. There are discussions, but I can tell you that I feel the enthusiasm of comrades who have been fighting for decades and who consider this initiative in Cuba to be very positive.

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*[Eric Toussaint](#) is a historian and political scientist who completed his Ph.D. at the universities of Paris VIII and Liège, is the spokesperson of the CADTM International, and sits on the Scientific Council of ATTAC France. He is the author of [Bankocracy](#) (2015); [The Life and Crimes of an Exemplary Man](#) (2014); *Glance in the Rear View Mirror. Neoliberal Ideology From its Origins to the Present*, Haymarket books, Chicago, 2012 ([see here](#)), etc.*

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Notes

[1] Refers to the paper presented at the International Colloquium dedicated to León Trotsky held in Havana between May 6 and 8, 2019, which was hosted by the Benito Juárez house. See the paper: Eric Toussaint, « Lenin and Trotsky versus the bureaucracy and Stalin. Russian Revolution and Transitional Society ». Spanish: <http://rebelion.org/docs/256387.pdf>. English: <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4900>

On the Colloquium dedicated to León Trotsky see:

<https://www.leftvoice.org/in-cuba-we-needed-trotsky-to-understand-what-happened-in-the-soviet-union-interview-with-frank-garcia> ; <http://links.org.au/trotsky-cuba-2019> ; <https://walterlippmann.com/troskys-ideas-discussed-in-cuba/> ;

<https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1252/neither-kings-nor-bureaucrats/>

[2] See Che Guevara, El Gran Debate Sobre la economía en Cuba, Editorial Ocean Press, 2018, 424 pages, ISBN: 978-1-925317-36-7, <https://oceansur.com/catalogo/titulos/el-gran-debate-2>

[3] See for example:

<http://www.fidelcastro.cu/es/discursos/discurso-en-la-clausura-del-v-encuentro-sobre-globalizacion-y-problemas-del-desarrollo-en>

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