

Trotsky as philosopher

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The place and role of Lev Davidovich Trotsky in history, in the Russian Revolution and in the international Marxist movement could not be seriously ignored or erased, despite all the controversies or falsifications and slanders by his worst enemies. But, at the same time, it is very often overlooked, even among his most dedicated followers, the *centrality* of the *philosophy of history* of Marxism, particularly of *materialist dialectics* in his thought and action throughout his entire revolutionary life, especially in its most critical moments.

A close examination of every step of his long, epic, and tragic itinerary demonstrates Trotsky's constant attention to philosophy at the service of revolution: from the years of his youth in the struggle against Czarism, in prisons and exile, to his involvement in the 1905 Russian Revolution as Chairman of the first Soviet in history to his leading role in the October 1917 Revolution, in the Red Army, in the first period of the Communist Third International, as well, later, at the head of the Left Bolshevik Opposition and the founding of the Fourth International up to his assassination in Mexico in 1940.

Here, we will focus on some of the major turning points of this remarkable trajectory, where crucial philosophical issues were raised to guide historical-political orientation, perspective, and strategy.

In the laboratory of Revolution

The intense attention on philosophical issues, and the fiery debates and

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controversies among intellectuals, workers, and dedicated revolutionaries in Czarist Russia, in its cities, prisons, or exiles in early 20th century, cannot be separated from the specific historical social development of the country. In a changed world-historical context, the social soil became volcanic by a constellation formed by an obsolete absolutism, a decaying aristocracy, a huge agrarian problem, a weak bourgeoisie and liberalism, the relative growth and specific weight of the intelligentsia, and the emergence of a revolutionary industrial proletariat. “*In the early years of this century, Russia was a vast laboratory of social thinking*”, Trotsky remarks in his autobiography.¹

The young Trotsky himself had his first and determining encounter with Marxism and dialectics in prison thanks to two essays by the brilliant Italian Marxist Antonio Labriola:

Unlike most Latin writers, Labriola had mastered the materialist dialectics, if not in politics – in which he was helpless – at least in the philosophy of history. The brilliant dilettantism of his exposition actually concealed a very profound insight. He made short work, and in marvelous style, of the theory of multiple factors which were supposed to dwell on the Olympus of history and rule our fates from there.²

This early acquaintance with Marx, Hegel and dialectics will have important consequences in the intellectual and political development of Trotsky as well as in his revolutionary activities. First, it led him in a decisive break and constant offensive *against positivism*, which in the form of the “*theory of multiple factors*” was dominant then in populist circles, through its Russian proponents Lavrov, Mikhaylovsky, Kareyev, and others, as well as *against the idealist trend of a “return to Kant”*, to his categorical imperative and to a normative philosophy.

Then, already in his first exile in eastern Siberia, the intellectual strength and vast cultural horizons of the young revolutionary were manifested in a series of articles for an Irkutsk newspaper, the *Vostochnoye Obozreniye* (The Eastern Review). Based on historical materialist dialectics, the young Trotsky’s critical articles dealt with a broad spectrum of topics, not only about political and social issues, but, very often, about literature and philosophy, on the Russian classic authors, as well as on Ibsen, Maupassant, Andreyev, or Nietzsche, “*the poet in philosophy and philosopher in poetry*”, as he called the German thinker. The axis of all these writings was the investigation of the contradictory relations between the individual and society. Later, in early Soviet Russia, they will be republished in a volume, and their author remarked: “*...although I might have written them differently to-day, I should not have had to change the substance of them.*”³

Undoubtedly, the writing of these articles represents not only the broad cultural interests of their author but also that they were part of his constant training in

1 Leon Trotsky, *My Life*, Chapter IX, *My First Exile*, www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/my-life/ch09.htm.

2 Ibid., Chapter VIII, *My First Prisons*.

3 Ibid., Chapter IX, *My First Exile*.

dialectical thought. Much later, on the eve of his violent death, Trotsky would write the famous lines: “*Dialectic training of the mind [is] as necessary to a revolutionary fighter as finger exercises to a pianist...*”⁴

The dress rehearsal of Permanent Revolution

Abrupt changes in the objective situation, especially great historical upheavals, challenge all the long-established ways of thinking, all fixed ideas and preconceptions, producing immense confusion and disorientation. The importance of dialectics at such turning points in history becomes a life-and-death question.

The first such great challenge for Trotsky and the entire workers’ movement in Russia and all over the world was the 1905 Revolution, the revolutionary mobilization of large masses, the emergence, for the first time, of the Soviets as organs of workers’ struggle and power, with Trotsky becoming the chairman of the St Petersburg Soviet. Quite correctly, the 1905 Revolution, despite its ferocious repression and defeat, is considered as the legendary “dress rehearsal” of the 1917 revolutionary overthrow of Czarism and the Great October Socialist Revolution.

It is in the fire of the revolutionary year 1905 that Lev Trotsky could re-elaborate, reformulate and check in the practice of the class struggle in the conditions of early 20th century the ***theory of Permanent Revolution***, first expounded by Marx and Engels in their *Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League* in March 1850.

The dynamics of Permanent Revolution was presented by Trotsky in a series of articles during the upheavals in 1905⁵ and found a definite form, in 1906, in his book *Results and Prospects*. Trotsky’s perspective opposed the “two stages” theory of the Mensheviks as well as the line supported then by the Bolsheviks for a “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry”. Finally, in 1917, it coincided with the strategic turn introduced by Lenin in his *April Theses* and it was historically confirmed and fully vindicated in the October victory.

Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution was based on the ***world-historic conditions*** produced by the world-wide expansion of capitalism⁶ and on what he calls “***the revolutionary logic of class relations***”⁷ in Russia. This combination gives the Russian Revolution, starting from unresolved bourgeois democratic tasks, led by the proletariat leaning on the peasantry, ***a permanent, socialist, and international character***:

Imposing its own type of economy and its own relations on all countries, capitalism has transformed the entire world into a single economic and political

4 Leon Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism*, New Park Publications, 1975, p. 70.

5 See particularly Leon Trotsky, “Up to the Ninth of January (1905)”, “Introduction to Ferdinand Lassalle’s Speech to the Jury (July 1905)”, “Foreword to Karl Marx, *Parizhkaya Kommuna* (December 1905)” in *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution: The Documentary Record*, edited and translated by Richard B. Day and Daniel Gaido, Brill, 2009.

6 Trotsky, “Introduction to Ferdinand Lassalle’s Speech to the Jury”, op. cit., p. 444.

7 Trotsky, “Foreword to Karl Marx, *Parizhkaya Kommuna*”, op. cit., p. 509.

organism [...] From the very outset, this fact gives currently unfolding events an international character and opens majestic prospects. Political emancipation led by the Russian working class is raising the latter to heights that are historically unprecedented, providing it with colossal means and resources, and making it the initiator of capitalism's worldwide liquidation, for which history has prepared all the objective preconditions.⁸

The theory of Permanent Revolution is not limited to Russia's national peculiarities. By analyzing them in their originality and their inner connection and interaction with the changed world historic conditions created by capitalism in our epoch, Trotsky develops them into an integrated Marxist theory, perspective, and strategy of the *world* socialist revolution.

Permanent Revolution actually becomes the conscious, dialectical self-reflection of the epoch itself, the invisible but central axis of all social and national emancipatory struggles.

This bold, gigantic leap in theory should be impossible without a break by Trotsky with the dominant bourgeois ideas for historical development, and, particularly, without a break with the prevalent Social Democratic "orthodoxy" of the Second International, permeated by empiricism, linear evolutionism, and economic reductionism. In other words, as Lenin himself would demonstrate in 1914 with his *Philosophical Notebooks*, this break and leap forward were impossible without an actual deepening of *materialist dialectics*.

Criticizing the enemies of the Permanence of the Revolution, Trotsky writes in December 1905: "*When they appeal to 'objective social development' in response to the idea of uninterrupted revolution, which for us, is a conclusion following from social-political relations, they forget that this same development includes not merely economic evolution, which they so superficially understand, but also, the revolutionary logic of class relations...*"⁹

Opposition to economic reductionism and social-political gradualism does *not* mean dismissal of the Marxist study of the sphere of economy. Against its "superficial understanding", he will propose later, in 1909, in a letter to Gorky for the education program in the Party school in Capri, Trotsky insists on the necessity of the study of *Capital* by Karl Marx: "***Capital***", he writes, "*is not simply 'a course of political economy', but a philosophy of the history of capitalist society.*"¹⁰

Trotsky's approach to the philosophical nature of *Das Kapital* converges with Lenin's crucial note in his *Philosophical Notebooks*: "*If Marx did not leave behind him a 'Logic' (with a capital letter) he did leave the logic of Capital, and this ought to be utilized to the full in this question. In Capital, Marx applied to a single science logic, dialectics and the theory of knowledge of materialism [three words are not needed: it is one and the same thing] which has taken everything valuable in Hegel*

8 Trotsky, "Introduction to Ferdinand Lassalle's Speech to the Jury", op. cit., pp. 444-445.

9 Trotsky, "Foreword to Karl Marx, *Parizhkaya Kommuna*", op. cit., p. 509.

10 Leon Trotsky, *On Party Education* in *The Ideas of Leon Trotsky* edited by Hillel Ticktin and Michael Cox, Porcupine Press, 1995, p. 373 (emphasis in the original).

*and developed it further.*¹¹

This is not an idle game with abstractions, a sterile academic exercise. Lenin and Trotsky follow, consciously and faithfully the direction given by Alexander Herzen's famous formulation: "***Dialectics is the algebra of the revolution***". And, as later Trotsky reminded the positive confirmation of this direction: "*It is historical experience that the greatest revolution in all history was not led by the party which started out with bombs but by the party which started out with dialectical materialism.*"¹²

The power of Marxism, the masses in power

Not accidentally, Trotsky, in his autobiography *My Life*, in the chapter "*In Power*" dedicated to the revolutionary seizure of power by the Soviets led by the Bolshevik Party in October 1917, begins by profoundly rethinking what Marxism is and what it actually is in relation to the revolutionary masses. He writes:

Marxism considers itself the conscious expression of the unconscious historical process. But the 'unconscious' process, in the historic-philosophical sense of the term not in the psychological, coincides with its conscious expression only at its highest point, when the masses, by sheer elemental pressure, break through the social routine and give victorious expression to the deepest needs of historical development. And at such moments the highest theoretical consciousness of the epoch merges with the immediate action of those oppressed masses who are farthest away from theory. The creative union of the conscious with the unconscious is what one usually calls 'inspiration'. The Revolution is the inspired frenzy of history.

Every real writer knows creative moments, when something stronger than himself is guiding his hand; every real orator experiences moments when someone stronger than the self of his every-day existence speaks through him. This is "inspiration". It derives from the highest creative effort of all one's forces. The unconscious rises from its deep well and bends the conscious mind to its will, merging it with itself in some greater synthesis.

The utmost spiritual vigor likewise infuses at times all personal activity connected with the movement of the masses. This was true for the leaders in the October days. The hidden strength of the organism, its most deeply rooted instincts, and its power of scent inherited from animal forebears all these rose and broke through the psychic routine to join forces with the higher historico-philosophical abstractions in the service of the revolution. Both these processes, affecting the individual and the mass, were based on the union of the conscious with the unconscious: the union of instinct the mainspring of the will with the higher theories of thought.¹³

In this dense, rich in determinations, self-reflection of Marxism by a Marxist and

11 V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works Vol. 38: Philosophical Notebooks*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976, p. 317.

12 Leon Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism*, op. cit., p. 100.

13 Leon Trotsky, *My Life*, chapter XXIX, *In Power*, www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/my-life/ch29.htm.

Bolshevik leader, grasped at the victorious moment of “*the greatest revolution in all history*” its most essential elements should be brought to focus.

First, its *materialist* character: Marxism does not exist as a body of independent abstractions freely floating in a realm of incorporeal ideas; it is *based on and determined, in the last instance, by the unconscious historical material process*, which exists objectively, primarily, and independently from any individual of social consciousness.

Second, its *dialectical* i.e., *contradictory* character: the conscious is the *opposite* of the unconscious. It arises out of the inherent contradictions of the unconscious historical material base, not automatically, mechanically, in a rectilinear way but through contradictions, dialectically. The opposition between the unconscious and the conscious, developing into an ever-sharpening contradiction can be superseded (*Aufhebung*). The unconscious historical process coincides with its conscious expression at the highest point of tension, when the barriers of social routine break down and are expressed “the deepest needs of historical development”:

At those crucial moments when the old order becomes no longer endurable to the masses, they break over the barriers excluding them from the political arena, sweep aside their traditional representatives, and create by their own interference the initial groundwork for a new régime [...] The history of a revolution is for us first of all a history of the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny.¹⁴

The “union of the unconscious and the conscious”, their interpenetration has to be “*creative*” transforming the opposites. Creative, non-dogmatic, revolutionary Marxism transforms itself into an all-powerful *material* force by penetrating the masses, by intervening *creatively* in the class struggle through a revolutionary organization, a revolutionary party of the working class armed with theory, strategy, tactics, and program, arming politically the masses in the struggle for their power. The masses are not passive objects but active subjects creating their own independent organs of self-organization, of struggle, of power, of *self-emancipation*.

Third, Marxism, to be creative and able to penetrate and win the confidence of the masses, has to fight to be, first of all, at the level of the demands of historical development. In other words, it has to be, through its own permanent development, “*the highest theoretical consciousness of the epoch*” - throughout all the changes, fluctuations, breaks, zigzags of an “*epoch of wars and revolutions*”, the “*epoch of imperialist decline of capitalism*”, a “*transitional epoch towards world Socialism*”, according to multiple definitions given by Lenin and Trotsky.

Transition is not linear but driven by contradictions. This objective reality makes it indispensable for revolutionaries to grasp them by *the logic of contradictions, dialectics*. It is the only way to overcome confusion and avoid impressionism and disorientation, particularly as appearances do not coincide but hide the deeper, essential driving forces of the epoch.

¹⁴ Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Preface, www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch00.htm.

At the beginning of the imperialist epoch, the question and theory of Permanent Revolution emerged in 1905 and were confirmed in 1917, internally related to the epochal change, determined by the same law of uneven and combined development, and opening the perspective of the world socialist revolution.

This is the material basis and reason why the controversy over the Permanent Revolution dominates the struggle, from 1924 onwards, under the impact of strategic defeats of the world revolution, particularly in Germany, against bureaucracy and its doctrine of self-legitimization of “socialism in a single country”, raised to a dogma by Bukharin and Stalin.

From this vantage point of our epoch, it can become clear that the struggle for the Permanent Revolution was and is *to complete on a world scale the revolutionary transformation that started in October 1917*. It was and is incompatible with any attempt to subordinate this task to national limitations or to the nationalist conservatism of any State bureaucracy. But it is not limited or exhausted in the life and death struggle between Trotskyism and Stalinism. For this reason, it did not finish in 1989-91.

Although isolated for long periods, under adverse conditions of defeats and retreats of the international revolutionary movement, the struggle for the Permanent Revolution remains actual because it expresses the deeper *objective* needs of the transitional epoch, and not any adventurist, voluntarist, or *subjectivist* attempt to continue the revolution by ignoring the existing conditions, in a rectilinear way.

It arises under the invincible pressure and impulse of a discontinued historical process, from its *incompleteness*. To use the terms of the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, it arises from the *Noch Nicht*, the Not Yet: “*The Not is lack of Something and also escape from this lack: thus it is a driving towards what is missing.*”¹⁵

From this broader view point, it can be correctly examined and grasped the necessity and actuality of the struggle of Trotsky, of the Left Opposition of the Bolshevik-Leninists, and later of the fighters for a Fourth International.

Back to dialectics, back to the future

What was for the revolutionary wing of the Second International, particularly for Lenin, the shock from the capitulation of the majority of social democracy at the irruption of the world imperialist war in 1914, it was for Trotsky and the vanguard revolutionary fighters around him the year 1933, the ascent to power in Germany of Hitler and Nazism, and the political bankruptcy, in front of this catastrophe, of the bureaucratized, Stalinized Comintern, its real collapse even before its formal dissolution by Stalin ten years later.

Trotsky did not limit himself to political polemics. To analyze and understand the violent convulsions of the epoch –the defeats in Europe and China, the bureaucratization of the first workers’ state born by the October Revolution, the rise of fascism and Nazism, the new forms of class collaboration under the name of “antifascist peoples fronts”, the Spanish revolution and its defeat, the imperialist

¹⁵ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986, p. 307.

drive towards the abyss of a new more devastating world war— he had to turn back to the fundamentals. He followed the steps of Lenin in 1914-15,¹⁶ and he started to study again Hegel's *Science of Logic* writing his own *Philosophical Notebooks of 1933-35*.¹⁷

His Notes on Hegel, written under the worst conditions of exile and persecution on “*a planet without a visa*”, are much shorter than the extensive philosophical notes taken by Lenin in the Zurich Library. But as Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* were crucial to grasping the methodological roots of the collapse of the Second International, for his orientation towards a Third International, as well as for his works on *Imperialism*, the *April Theses* and the *State and Revolution*, Trotsky's re-working of materialist dialectics was essential for his orientation towards a Fourth International as well as for his major work in *Revolution Betrayed*, the 1938 Transitional Program and the texts of *In Defense of Marxism*, at the beginning of the Second World War defending both the USSR and dialectical materialism within the newly founded Fourth International.

Trotsky concentrates his attention on the Book I of *Science of Logic*, particularly on the transitions from *quantitative changes* to a new *quality*. It is obvious that his effort is focused on determining if there are changes *in quality* in the role of the Third International, and above all in the Soviet Union, to draw the necessary political and organizational conclusions for the international workers' movement and its revolutionary vanguard.

For the bureaucratized Comintern, the conclusion was that a qualitative change was clear after the German debacle, and it was beyond repair, without any possibility of being reformed by opposition criticism and pressure from the masses. A new International was necessary. For the USSR, the conclusion was very different and nuanced. Despite the usurpation of workers' power by a hypertrophied bureaucratic cast, its foundations established by the October Socialist Revolution were not destroyed and had to be defended against imperialism, capitalist restoration, and the bureaucracy itself. He opposed the supporters of the superficial theories of “Russian State Capitalism” or “bureaucratic collectivism” etc. In *The Revolution Betrayed*, he analyzed the contradictions of the Soviet Union rejecting any attempt to give “*a finished definition into an unfinished process*”, a *transitional* society whose future, a regression to capitalism or an advance to world Socialism will depend on “*the living struggle of living forces, on a national and international scale*”. Again, *the transitional nature* not only of the Soviet Union but *of the epoch* itself comes to the forefront together with the importance of clarifying in Marxist philosophy the central category of dialectical *transition*.

Working in this direction, Trotsky, in his *Philosophical Notebooks*, elaborates on two important concepts:

16 See Lenin *Philosophical Notebooks*, op. cit., and, among others, Savas Michael-Matsas, “Lenin and the Path of Dialectics” in *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*, edited by Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Žižek, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007, pp. 101-119.

17 Published more than a half century later (after the opening of the Trotsky Archives at Harvard in 1980) by Columbia University Press, 1986, edited by Philip Pomper.

- the concept of *Catastrophe*,¹⁸ for a theory of Revolutions, against the liberal-gradual conception of history, and
- the concept of *Hybrids*,¹⁹ for natural and social phenomena and formations escaping any formal classification and demanding an investigation by the method of materialist dialectics.

These two concepts of *Catastrophe* and *Hybrids* are vital to developing *a theory of knowledge of the transitional epoch*, understanding its open dialectic, and probing into its logic of contradictions.

For a theory of knowledge of the transitional epoch

Lenin loved to repeat Pushkin's lyrics from *Eugene Onegin*:

Happy are those who lived in this world in the moments when its fate changed...

It is in these moments that the true nature of things is revealed: nothing is fixed, everything changes, everything flows and collapses into the abyss, to reemerge changed again. But then the knowledge of this changing world, the truth itself, is put to the test. In times of transition, when the old dies and the new finds it difficult to be born, when every fixed perception is shaken, and every certainty is dragged into the generalized stream of collapse, how can you catch the elusive water, from where to hold on, in the dissolution of everything?

Where, how does it stand and what is the truth in a world at a time when its destiny is changing, when everything we knew takes the path of destruction?

At such times, formal thought that defines everything with static categories is paralyzed by seeing its shapes shattered and its pieces dragged powerlessly into the vortex. The paradox, however, is that formal thought, within its destruction, is regenerated. It reassembles its debris into new combinations, which will collapse again. It strengthens itself just when its limits prove to be suffocating, exacerbating asphyxiation.

The conservative tendencies of thought, enshrined in a prolonged historical practice, are in constant shock but constantly resist them by trying to close the rifts in every way and means. But the wreck remains inevitable. The only way out is the exit from the very confined ground of formal logic and the bold entry into the very eye of the whirlpool of History with the compass of dialectics, the logic of movement.

Lenin, at the crucial moment of 1914, stressed: "*The question is not whether there is movement but how to express it in the logic of concepts.*"²⁰

Trotsky also focused his attention at the crucial time of 1933, on the problem of formal thinking with its static categories and classifications.

18 Leon Trotsky, *Philosophical Notebooks, 1933-1935: Writings on Lenin, Dialectics, and Evolutionism*, translated, annotated, and with introductory essays by Philip Pomper, Russian text annotated by Yuri Felshtinsky, New York: Columbia University, 1986, pp. 133-134.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

20 Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks*, p. 256.

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Both Lenin and Trotsky turned to Hegel precisely because it was Hegel who exercised the deepest and sharpest criticism of Logic, as developed from Aristotle to Kant, pointing out its main weakness: the separation of the movement of thought from that of its object and its transformation into a subjective activity external to the object that imposes its static abstractions on it. Conversely, dialectical abstractions are moments of the very self-movement of their objective content.

“Hegel himself spoke many times”, Trotsky notes, “*about the necessary Concrete emerging from the immanent movement of ‘moments’ - a movement that represents the direct opposite of an analytical approach (Verfahrens), i.e., of an activity external to the object itself (Sache) and inherent in the subject.*”²¹

In the “analytical approach”, life freezes in the external forms that isolate individual aspects of it. On the contrary, in the dialectical transition from the Abstract, poor in determinations (in this respect the empirical ‘concrete’ is abstract), to the Concrete, which combines multiple and opposite determinations in their necessary interconnection and sequence, life itself reveals itself pulsating in thought.

“Hegel himself,” writes Trotsky,

examines dialectics precisely as logic, as the science of the forms of the process of human knowledge. But in Hegel through these ‘forms’ the world develops... For Hegel dialectics is a logic of larger dimensions - in space and in time – a universal logic, the objective logic of the universe.²²

Following Marx and Lenin, Trotsky reads Hegel materialistically:

The identity of Being and of thought in Hegel means the identity of objective and subjective logic, their ultimate coincidence. Materialism accepts the correspondence of subjective and objective, their unity but not their identity, in other words it does not release matter from its materiality in order to keep alone the logical skeleton of its law governed character, the expression and appearance of which is scientific thought (consciousness).²³

If idealism removes materiality from matter and material flesh from its logical skeleton, vulgar materialism, especially in the Stalinist form of “*Diamat*”, attempts to impose from the outside a dead skeleton of logical schemata on the living flesh of matter, killing it, turning it into an inert, quality-free mechanical mass.

Actually, “*materialistic dialectics (or dialectical materialism)*”, Trotsky stresses, “*is not the arbitrary welding of two independent terms but a differentiated unity.*”²⁴ Unity that is not an abstract identity it contains the difference – exactly what disappears both in idealism and vulgar materialism (which also ends in the subjective idealism of the worst kind).

21 Trotsky, *Philosophical Notebooks*, p. 146.

22 Ibid., p. 117.

23 Ibid., p. 118.

24 Ibid., pp. 140-141.

Trotsky pays the greatest attention to the difference, because he always consciously has as a target reductionism, the curse of established “left-wing” (and not only) thinking, in its many forms.

It is in this spirit that his observation is made on the dialectics of Nature, which has been so distorted in official Stalinist textbooks that it is contemptuously and easily rejected by all kinds of idealists of Marxist or anti-Marxist reference. Trotsky, not only in his *Notebooks* but in many of his texts,²⁵ argued that the material foundations of dialectics lie in nature’s own dialectics. But he denies the dangerous devastating reductionism that turned it into the hands of every Zhdanov and Lysenko into a strangling straitjacket for every scientific research. Trotsky writes:

Just as knowledge is not identical to the world (despite Hegel’s idealistic axiom), the dialectic of knowledge is not identical to the dialectic of Nature. Consciousness is presented as a completely special part of Nature, which has its own peculiarities and prerogatives, which are completely absent from the rest of Nature. Subjective dialectics must therefore also be presented as a particular part of objective dialectics – with its own particular forms and laws. (The danger lies in the reduction –in the form of ‘objectivism’– of suffering, convulsions of consciousness in the objective nature).²⁶

The whole conception of the subject in history is methodologically founded by Trotsky in his rupture with reductionism on the basis of a materialist reversal of Hegel’s idealist dialectic. He writes:

What does logic express? The law of the external world or the law of consciousness? The question is introduced as a mutually excluding duality and therefore erroneously. The laws of logic express the laws (regularities, modes) of consciousness in its active relationship with the external world. The relation of consciousness to the external world is the relation of the (particular, specific) part to the whole.²⁷

It is the correspondence of interconnected different fields within the same “differentiated unity” (Trotsky) –and not an abstract identity, a reduction of objective and subjective dialectics to some common rules. Each retains its own particularity and transcends it to its other.

This clarification is crucial when it comes to our primary question: *what is the path that leads to truth in times when all certainty collapses?* What is the theory of knowledge of the transitional epoch that avoids sinking into relativism and skepticism?

According to Trotsky’s approach, a single reference to dialectics is not enough. The latter must be seen in its materialistic texture as a differentiated unity: the

²⁵ See, for example, *Dialectical Materialism and Science*, 1925 or *In Defense of Marxism*, 1938.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 145.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 129.

dialectical theory of the historic Being of the transitional epoch of imperialist decline of capitalism, coincides but it is not identical or a substitute of dialectics as a theory of knowledge. Each moment of the differentiated unity has its own peculiarities and laws, its own cognitive requirements. It is through the dialectical unfolding of *all* the moments of the process that the fundamental historical-philosophical concept of our transitional epoch rises: the Permanent Revolution.

Without its philosophical structure and function, the theory of the Permanent Revolution is transformed into a closed formula, into a mechanical repetition of some formulations, into an a priori static category that moves outside its object – radically altered to its opposite. Unfortunately, this was done by a large number of groups, which are referring to Trotsky's tradition.

The impasses of metaphysical-formal thinking become evident in every attempt to approach the great and unexpected issues posed by our time. Particularly the October Revolution, its fate, the nature of the Soviet Union, the attitude towards it, became the center of the fiercest ideological conflicts but also the reef where every classification-formalist logic collided and sank. It is no coincidence that the controversy over precisely these central issues of our times, Trotsky, unlike his opponents and many of his descendants, broadened and deepened it into a *γίγαντομαχία περί της ουσίας* [a battle of Giants over Essence]²⁸, a confrontation over method and philosophy, in the foundations of theory and practice.

He particularly clashed with those on the lines of the anti-Stalinist Left who wanted to interpret the transitional phenomena and formations of the time, such as the USSR under Stalinism, by applying a priori Kantian categories and abstract static norms for the “ideal workers' state”. Here, Trotsky introduces his concept of the *Hybrids*, particularly important to understand an epoch of transition

According to the logical classification some species (phenomena) are placed within the boundaries easily, but others they present difficulties: they can be placed here and there and with some stricter correlation – nowhere. While causing indignation in classifying formalists, similar transitional forms are of great interest to dialecticians, because they break down the organic boundaries of classification by revealing active real interconnections and the sequence of the living process.²⁹

Every transitional era gives birth to hybrids – that the “classifying formalists” hate what causes the great interest of dialecticians. The Hybrid, the Unclassified demonstrates in its own way the non-linear character of living historical development in Nature and Society. That is why it is at the heart of the theory of the Permanent Revolution and of its law of combined and uneven development.

Trotsky called it the basic law of motion of the living historical process. Against the linear “stages theory” of Menshevism and Stalinism, he stressed that “*leaping stages (or prolonged stay in one of them) is exactly what uneven development*

28 Plato, *The Sophist*.

29 Trotsky, *Philosophical Notebooks*, op. cit., p. 118.

consist.”³⁰ Combined development, again, is not some arbitrary mixing of different socio-historical levels of development but their *organic* combination into a living formation of a natural-historical process,³¹ the “*unity of diverse*” in Marx’s formulation in the *Manuscript of 1857-58 (Grundrisse)*.³²

Trotsky, speaking about the uneven and combined development, identifies the first as the centrifugal and the second as the centripetal force, the opposing tendencies of unification and separation, crystallization and dissolution, birth and decay of socio-economic formations of history.

They recall, in some way, Φιλότης [Love] and Νείκος [Hostility], the two “demons” of the pre-Socratic thinker Empedocles, the two opposite forces of cosmogony that in their eternal struggle shape everything, while giving birth to the course of this natural – historical process, to many Hybrids and Monsters.

*but as the demons kept coming together,
these were mixed, as they happened to meet
and many more were born all the time.*

*Many were born with two faces and breasts,
and vice versa, they emerged
human genders with the head of an ox...³³*

The Bizarre, the Hybrid, the Unclassified, the Monstrous, all kinds of deformation possibly emerge in the process of transformation, as some “stages” become protracted and others compressed to the point of annihilation and, some of them are skipped.

“*The Pathological is the obstructed Normal*”, said Virchow, the father of Pathological Anatomy, a great dialectician, revolutionary and a friend of Marx and Engels. This truth is inconceivable not only in formal thinking, in empiricism, in rationalism, which is nothing more than “*the attempt to construct an integrated system on the basis of vulgar logic*”³⁴ but also in irrationalism, which is only the same vulgar logic overturned by the obstacles it encounters. Monsters are not born merely “*from the sleep of reason*”, according to Goya’s saying, but from the material contradictions of life, especially when their solution is prevented.

The above verses of Empedocles could depict the strange hybrids that appeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union and were called “Novyi Rusky” - (New – Russians). “The former Party bureaucrats with the Rolex and the Mercedes recall those monstrous beings that Empedocles describes, as the offspring of oxen with a human face, or as the offspring of ox-headed humans.” “*What else are the Stalinist*

30 Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution*, New Park Publications, London, 1975, p. 117.

31 Ibid., p. 115.

32 K. Marx, *Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Martin Nicolaus, Pelican, 1973, p. 101.

33 Empedocles, *On Nature*, Fragments 53, 54-59, 61, Diels-Kranz.

34 Trotsky, *Philosophical Notebooks*, p. 143.

*offsprings with Rockefeller's head or newborn capitalists with Stalin's moustache?"*³⁵

Trotsky had warned that it was a fatal methodological error to give finished definitions to unfinished processes or to impose dead formulas on a living organism in a process of transition – or rather in *a crisis of transition*.³⁶

These post-Soviet hybrids that “*in logical classification can be placed here and there and with a stricter correlation nowhere*” are clearly unprecedented in History. When Marxists refrain from providing a finished definition to an unfinished process, it does not mean that they declare their agnosticism in front of the unclassified and the monstrous, born in an unfinished process. They examine with the utmost care and study every event and moment of this process having as a compass materialist dialectics. “*Dialectics*”, Trotsky warns, “*does not absolve the researcher from persistently investigating the facts; on the contrary, it demands it. In turn, it gives research thinking flexibility, helps it to confront ossified prejudices, equips it with invaluable analogies, and trains it in a bold spirit founded on prudence.*”³⁷

When a materialist dialectical investigation of a Hybrid in the epoch of transition and of the crisis of transition studies how this entity “*breaks down the organic boundaries of classification*” it does not end in hopeless confusion, in an impossibility to define and therefore into an abstract chaos. It seeks and can discover “*the active real interconnections and sequence of the living process.*”³⁸ How can this be achieved?

The key lies in the crucial sentence Trotsky is copying from Hegel right at the very beginning of his Notebooks: “*The negation of the concept within itself, in sich selbst, in itself.*”³⁹ Trotsky comments:

If we take the fabric of life as a complex knit, then the concept can be compared to individual loops of the knit. Each concept seems independent and complete (this is how formal logic works with them) whereas in reality each loop has two ends that connect it to the side loops. If you pull one end, the noose is untied – it is the dialectical negation of a concept in its limits, in its quasi-independence... The concept is not a closed circle but a noose, one end of which moves towards the past – the other towards the future. If you pull one end you can untie the noose but you can also tie it in a dead knot.⁴⁰

Trotsky starts from the web of *life*, natural-social life, not from some abstract Being. What interests him is the texture and plot of the tissue, the interconnection and sequence of the woven loops. These are the ones that isolate “*the focal points in the web*” of phenomena, distinguishing them and “*which assist in cognising*

35 S. Michael-Matsas, *Restoration or Revolution?*, Leon Publications, 1992 (in Greek), p. 238.

36 Ibid.

37 Trotsky, *Philosophical Notebooks*, p. 135.

38 Ibid., p. 138.

39 Ibid., p. 118.

40 Ibid., pp. 118-119.

and mastering it”, as Lenin describes the logical categories.⁴¹ Formal logic treats them and acts with them as if they are independent and complete, static, external to each other, without negativity, dead knots in the web. Dialectics captures their self-negation through the historical dynamics of the whole developing web of life.

Precisely for this reason, Trotsky pays particular attention to the approach and distinction made by Hegel between Understanding (*Verstand*) and Reason (*Vernunft*). Understanding separates the object of knowledge into its distinct determinations. Then, if it is not superseded by Reason, it fails to discover the unity of the individual determinations through their negative relations and regresses to their formalistic treatment, seeking their coherence in empirical data and failing in its goal. Negative dialectical Reason, on the other hand, manages to see the interconnectedness of determinations precisely in their contradiction, dissolving their static character.

Trotsky comments on the respective passages of the Hegelian “*Science of Logic*”:

Thinking in the process of cognition begins with differentiation, with instant photography, with the definition of boundaries-concepts, where the separate moments of the process are posed but from where the process itself escapes. These boundaries and concepts created in the process of cognition are then transformed into barriers to knowledge. Dialectics removes these barriers, revealing the relativity of immovable concepts, the transition to each other.⁴²

The transition of concepts from one to another is performed by negation. “But this negation,” Trotsky explains,

does not mean returning to a tabula rasa. The Reason already holds a) the concept and b) the recognition of it as unfounded. This recognition is tantamount to the necessity to construct a new concept... So in the field of thought (cognition) quantitative changes lead to qualitative and these transformations are not even evolutionary in nature but are accompanied by breaks of the gradual, that is, small or large mental catastrophes. To sum up, this means that the development of knowledge has also a dialectical character.⁴³

Elaborating on the Hegelian notion of a “*negation of the Concept within itself*”, Trotsky introduces the concept of catastrophe within the concept itself. The development of knowledge passes through ruptures, explosions, even catastrophes within concepts. In other words, it has a dialectical or, what Walter Benjamin had described as a “*destructive*” character. It opens roads where appears by destroying obstacles and overcoming deadlocks.

The concept in Trotsky is a noose in the net intertwined with the web of life – a noose whose one end moves to the past and the other to the future. To tie the noose to a knot or to untie it, its negation, depends on which end you pull. In this analogy the essential difference between Hegel and Trotsky can be seen.

41 Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks*, p. 93.

42 Trotsky, *Philosophical Notebooks*, op. cit., p. 141.

43 Ibid., p. 144.

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In Hegel, the *Logical* is the timeless within time, in the *Historical*.⁴⁴ In Trotsky, historical time is the weft of concepts, the Logical is the evolving plot of Historical time.

In Hegel, the thought of time transcends time. In Trotsky, historical time weaves thought.

In Hegel, the timeless determines the succession in time. In Trotsky, historical time dissolves, binds, supersedes concepts, it determines their logical sequence in succession.

The negation of the concept in Trotsky takes place towards the future. That is why the Logical is not *post festum*, it is the Historical *sub specie futuri*.

At this point we can point out Trotsky's unexpected encounter with a thinker of the second half of the 20th century who has also been misunderstood by friends and enemies: *Gilles Deleuze*. The loop concept with its edge in the future, which Trotsky sees, refers to the concept that according to Deleuze is "*the outline, formation, constellation of an upcoming event*."⁴⁵

From this vantage point, the development of the highest historical philosophical concept of the transitional epoch is "bound" or "unbound" by its end to be decided by the struggle of living forces during this transition: ***Barbarism or World Socialism***, the upcoming event of a future, classless, communist humanity prepared and self-emancipated by the Permanent Revolution.

Or, to put it in the words of Deleuze: "*The creation of concepts calls within itself to a future form, it calls for a new land and for a people that does not yet exist*."⁴⁶

The algebra of Revolution can guide us to solve the riddle of History.

Athens, March 5, 2021
150 years from the birth of Rosa Luxemburg

44 See Hegel, *Encyclopedia* #258.

45 G. Deleuze-F. Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, Minuit, 1991, p. 36.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 104.