THE QUESTION OF THERMIDOR AND BONAPARTISM

In 1935 Trotsky revised his understanding of Thermidor and Bonapartism. He accepted that the understanding of Thermidor, which had been related to the restoration of capitalism, was inapplicable because the economy had developed in terms of the advance of nationalised property forms. Thermidor in the period of the French revolution meant the end of the popular character of its regime, and the result was a situation of reaction and the realisation of the rule of the bourgeoisie. In other words the process of the French revolution was continued, and its exceptional 'proletarian' aspect was ended. Instead the logical elitist aspect of the French revolution was affirmed, and this resulted in formation of the Bonapartist regime. These political developments resulted in the strengthening of the state and this meant the possibility to develop capitalism under these auspices. As Trotsky explained: “The bourgeoisie appropriated more and more property and power (either directly and immediately or through special agents like Bonaparte) but made no attempt whatever against the social conquests of the revolution; on the contrary, it solicitously sought to strengthen, organize and stabilize them. Napoleon guarded bourgeois private property, including that of the peasants, against both the rabble and the claims of the expropriated proprietors. Feudal Europe hated Napoleon as the living embodiment of the revolution, and it was correct according to its standards.”(1)

In the manner outlined above, Thermidor and Bonapartism are actually the logical development of the bourgeois revolution and contrast to its period of instability between 1789 and 1794. In this context the regime of property was stabilised, and the conditions for the accumulation of capital were established. But, if Trotsky wants to explain the process of degeneration of the Soviet regime in the USSR, it would seem that the terms Thermidor and Bonapartism must have a different meaning if they are to be explanatory. It could be argued that Bonapartist is still relevant because it refers to a single person dictatorship. But we would question the applicability of the term Thermidor. This is because it would be contradictory to equate the Thermidor of the French revolution – which relates to a period of increasing stability – with the regression of the Soviet state. Instead we need to a different term to explain the process of degeneration. We would suggest that between 1918 and 1928 the USSR was a bureaucratic workers state. In this context the imposition of a Bonapartist regime in 1928 implied the development of a distinct type of social formation. This development was connected to the establishment of the capacity to extract surplus product from the producers. The formation of the political regime of Bonapartism was identical to this creation of a new type of class society. Trotsky disputes this view. He contends that: “In this sense we may talk about the dictatorship of the bureaucracy, and even the personal dictatorship of Stalin. But this usurpation was made possible and can maintain itself only because the social content of the dictatorship of the bureaucracy is determined by those productive relations that were created by the proletarian revolution. In this sense we may say with complete justification that the dictatorship of the proletariat finds its distorted but indubitable expression in the dictatorship of the bureaucracy.”(2)

What this comment glosses over is that at some point the dictatorship of the bureaucracy becomes the expression of a class society. This point is reached by the forced collectivisation and industrialisation of society. The problem was that Soviet regime was never based on the flourishing of industrial democracy, and instead was maintained by a one party state. This meant it was effectively upheld by the rule of a bureaucracy. Hence the bureaucracy had two options. The first was to consider itself a problem and to advocate genuine political democracy as the basis to regenerate the regime. This was the effective programme of the Left Opposition. Or, alternatively, it could regard the New Economic Policy as an insecure method for maintaining the promotion of socialism – which meant the break with Bukharin became inevitable – and instead have a perspective of the economic modernisation of society. This approach would lead to the creation of a new ruling class. Trotsky could deny this was what was happening because he preferred the concept of degeneration, which took the form of Thermidor and then Bonapartism. This degeneration did not overcome the social foundations of the workers state, and so he defined developments in terms of the formation of the degenerated workers state. What is important to him is the year 1924 which he equates with the Thermidor of the Russian revolution and the end of the popular character of the regime. This Thermidor occurs on the basis of the retention of the nationalised basis of the economy, and so a type of workers state is retained. But we can argue that this Thermidor never took place, despite the defeat of the Left Opposition in the 1920's, because the rule of the bureaucracy was already established under Lenin. This situation meant the options were either regeneration of the regime through the revival of the Soviets, and the introduction of workers control of production, or the consolidation of the existing regime in terms of the introduction of its effective economic control of the surplus product.

Trotsky never understood this process because he considered the emergence of nationalised economy as progressive, and so the creation of the bureaucracy was an actual defence of the workers state: “The upsurge of the nationalised productive forces, which began in 1923 and which came unexpectedly to Soviet bureaucracy itself, created the necessary economic prerequisites for the stabilization of the latter.”(3) Thus he contends that a comparison with the Thermidor of the French revolution is possible, because this occurrence under the Soviet regime also represents the consolidation of the economic process under the existing political system: “In France, the prolonged stabilization of the Thermidorean-Bonapartist regime was made possible only thanks to the development of the productive forces that had been freed from the fetters of feudalism.”(4) But there was actually a profound difference that was not recognised by Trotsky. Whilst Thermidor was the logical regime of the emerging capitalism in France, the political system of the bureaucracy was opposed to the interests of socialism in the USSR. Hence the degenerated workers state could only be temporary: it could be progressively replaced either by socialism, or become some form of exploitative society. The latter situation occurred by 1929, and this meant Thermidor was illusory because under bureaucratic rule a regressive political regime that was compatible with socialism was not possible. Trotsky does not recognise this development because he considers Stalinism to be a bureaucratic government that is compatible with the aims of building socialism: “The proletarian revolution not only frees the productive forces from the fetters of private ownership but also transfers them to the direct disposal of the state that it itself creates. While the bourgeois state, after the revolution, confines itself to a police role, leaving the market to its own laws, the workers state assumes the direct role of economist and organizer. The replacement of one political regime by another exerts only an indirect and superficial influence upon the market economy. On the contrary, the replacement of the workers government by a bourgeois or petty-bourgeois government would inevitably lead to the liquidation of the planned beginnings and subsequently, to the restoration of private property. In contradistinction to capitalism, socialism is built not automatically but consciously. Progress towards socialism is inseparable from that state power that is desirous of socialism or that is constrained to desire it.”(5)

In other words despite the serious criticisms of the Soviet bureaucracy, and the fact that it represents a process of degeneration, he still considers that it represents the aim of building socialism. Socialist construction is connected to the fact that there is still a workers state. This is an important mistake, because the nationalised character of the economy is only a form that increasingly represents the intention of the bureaucracy to exploit the working population. Consequently, the problem with the term Thermidor is that it is a static term that explains a political process of degeneration and in this manner does not explain what is occurring in economic terms. In crude terms it refers to the end of the regime of Lenin, and its replacement by that of Stalin. But this ignores what was already problematical between 1918-24, and how the USSR could not be a healthy workers state because of its isolation, low level of the productive forces, and the centralisation of the economy that overcomes the prospect of industrial democracy. This utilisation of Thermidor is also used in order to justify the conception of Bonapartism which is unable to explain what has happened since 1924. Instead Trotsky defines it in the following manner: “Therefore the Bonapartist degeneration of the dictatorship represents the direct and immediate threat to all the social conquests of the proletariat.”(6) This standpoint implies that there is a contradiction between Bonapartism and the social character of the regime. This view is erroneous, because Bonapartist dictatorship expresses the logic of a system which connects political repression to the development of an economy based on exploitation. There is not a contradiction between the political and economic, but instead the role of the political influences the generation of new exploitative relations of production from the late 1920's. It was the creation of a repressive personal dictatorship, or Bonapartism, that represented the conditions to promote the intensified exploitation of the peasants and workers. Instead of this understanding Trotsky differentiated between the political regimes of Thermidor and Bonapartism – which meant repression and terror – from the economy. This meant despite considerable problems, the development of the productive forces. In contrast to his utilisation of the analogy to explain the connection between Thermidor as a political regime and the economic development of French capitalism, Trotsky separates the political and the economic in relation to the Soviet system. He may have denied that the system was socialist, but he also rejected any suggestion that it was characterised by exploitation. The most retrogressive aspects could be defined in terms of political features such as purge trails and the system of terror, but the economy is defined as progressive. What is not explained is that it is the very contradictions of the economic limitations of the system which result in the political tensions and repression. Bonapartism is the outcome of these economic developments.

However, there is a difference with the Bonapartism of the past. The role of Napoleon Bonaparte represented the progressive aspirations to liberate Europe from feudalism and to stabilise capitalism within France. In contrast, the development of Bonapartism in Russia was in order to justify an exploitative system that was inferior to socialism. Hence it was reactionary and based on the rejection of the attempt to promote the worker-peasant alliance in order to advance the prospect of socialism. Thus what maintained Stalinism was the role of the state, which was lacking any important economic rationality. The importance of power was what motivated the bureaucracy, and because of this aspect the question of economic organisation and development was secondary. The conception of the workers state could not explain the extent of the degeneration that had occurred. In terms of explaining the process of the creation of the new social formation it was initially necessary for the bureaucracy to establish control of the state apparatus. This development enabled the vital economic changes to occur, as Joseph Carter explains: “Stalinist Russia is thus a reactionary state based upon a new system of economic exploitation, bureaucratic collectivism. The ruling class is the bureaucracy which through its control of the state collectively owns, controls and administers the means of production and exchange. The basic motive force of the economy is the extraction of more and more surplus labour from the toilers so as to increase the revenue, power and position of the bureaucracy. The economy is organized and directed through state totalitarian planning and political terrorism. The toilers are compelled by the state (as well as economic necessity) to labour in the factories and fields. Forced labour is thus an inherent feature of present day Russian productive relations.”(6)

Trotsky argued that nationalised property under the regime of a degenerated workers state could not become the basis of a new type of exploitative regime. This was his dogmatic assumption as the theory of bureaucratic collectivism outlined. The point is that if the bureaucracy is increasingly unaccountable to the working class because of its domination of the state, it will at some point attempt to consolidate this situation by establishing control of the economy by means of extracting the surplus product. Trotsky was unable to develop a convincing reply to this standpoint because he suggested that nationalised property had a character which meant it could only act on behalf of the working class.(8) There was a certain autonomy between the role of the nationalised economy and the political autonomy of the bureaucracy. Hence he ruled out explanations that suggested the development of exploitation within the relations of production. Max Shachtman has an answer to this point when he contends that: “The Stalinist Bonapartist regime preserves the nationalised property in its own way, it is said. Correct! But why does that fact testify to the existence in Russia of a workers state?.......Does the Bonapartist regime of Stalin preserve nationalized property for the tangible benefit of the working class? If so, what benefit? Does it protect, consolidate, expand the economic and social (to say nothing of the political) position of the proletariat?....Which class does the Stalinist Bonapartist regime reduce to slavery, and which class does it accord vast increases of wealth, social position and power, while it is at work in preserving nationalized property “in its own way.”(9) Trotsky effectively accepts this understanding when he comments that: “The workers lost all influence whatever in management of the factory. With piecework payment, hard conditions of material existence, lack of free movement, with terrible police repression penetrating the life of every factory, it is hard for the worker to feel himself a “free workman”. In the bureaucracy he sees the manager, in the state, the employer. Free labour is incompatible with the existence of a bureaucratic state.”(10)

It would seem logical from this comment to imply that the bureaucracy extracts a surplus from the working class because of this exploitative aspect of the relations of production. Instead in an illogical manner, Trotsky justifies a different conclusion: “The means of production belong to the state. But the state, so to speak, “belongs” to the bureaucracy. If these as yet wholly new relations should solidify, become the norm and be legalized, whether with or without the resistance from the workers, they would in the long run, lead to a complete liquidation of the social conquests of the proletarian revolution. But to speak of that now is at least premature. The proletariat has not yet said its last word. The bureaucracy has not yet created social supports for its dominion in the form of special types of property. It is compelled to defend state property as the source of its power and income. In this aspect of its activity it still remains a weapon of proletarian dictatorship.”(11)

But the point is that the bureaucracy defends nationalised property because of the very aspect that it promotes exploitation of the working class, a situation which is admitted to be reality by Trotsky. He describes the relations of production in terms of the extraction of a surplus from the working class, which is made possible by control of the state and economy by the bureaucracy. But he then denies the implications of this reasoning by suggesting that the nationalised economy is still the gain of the working class and the bureaucracy has not created its distinctive form of property. This is an abstract type of reasoning which compares unfavourably to the concrete exposition of the fact that the working class is exploited in the present circumstances. Hence he can only deny the logic of his own analysis by suggesting in the most vague manner that the nationalised economy still acts to the benefit of the working class and is not effectively controlled by the bureaucracy. This abstraction conflicts with what is concrete in the approach of Trotsky which is to admit the actuality of the exploitation of the workers. He asserts that the bureaucracy preserves state property.(12) Precisely, but the reason is not the continuation of the gains and character of the social regime created by the October revolution, but rather that this situation is defined by the transformation of the bureaucracy into an exploitative class. The defence of nationalised property by the bureaucracy is not because in some sense the result of the social character of the October revolution is being upheld, but instead it is an expression of the domination of a new ruling class within the relations of production, and the fact that it exploits the working class.

However, this does not mean that the bureaucratic collectivist school was correct to reject defence of the USSR in world war two. Shachtman maintains that: “Again and again I repeat, we must judge our position of defeatism or defensism in any country by the interests of the socialist world proletariat, and not of the workers of any one country. The victory of German imperialism in the war would have nothing but reactionary effects. The victory of Anglo-American imperialism over Germany, likewise. We are for the defeat of German imperialism – not by Anglo-American imperialism but by the German proletariat......From the standpoint of our basic criterion what are the objective consequences of “defence of the Soviet Union” now? Taken on a world scale, and that is the only way we can take it, since we are not Russian nationalists, it means the imperialist victory of Washington and London over German imperialism, with all the tragic consequences that flow from it.”(13)

This approach represents a sectarian error which ignores important aspects of the war between Germany and Russia. The forces of German imperialism are attempting to impose colonial slavery onto the USSR. Hence, despite the reactionary role of Stalinism, we can support the USSR trying to oppose the imperialist occupation of its country. This does not mean that James Cannon is right to call for defence of a workers state. Instead it was necessary to recognise that despite the reactionary character of the Stalin regime it was possible to defend its opposition to the imposition of Fascist tyranny. However, this defence does not mean being uncritical of the military strategy of Stalin, and we advocate the necessity of developing unity between the German and Soviet working class. In other words we would aim to support the transformation of the national war of the USSR into a revolutionary war for socialism and the overthrow of imperialism. We cannot criticise the USSR for entering into an alliance with the UK and USA, but we are critical of these countries having common war objectives. Instead the aim of overthrowing fascism requires the development of the perspective of proletarian revolution. At some point this means opposing Stalinism would become principled. It is delicate task deciding when this moment has arrived. But the objective of defence of the USSR does not mean uncritical support for its expansion into Europe. Instead at a certain point it would be necessary to support the uprising of the conquered peoples of Europe as the most effective and principled basis to bring about the defeat of fascism.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Trotsky, The Workers State, Thermidor and Bonapartism selected writings 1934-35, Pathfinder Press, 1973 p168-169

(2)ibid p173

(3)ibid p175

(4)ibid p174-175

(5)ibid p179

(6)ibid p182

(7)Joseph Carter: Bureaucratic Collectivism in Sean Matgamna (Editor) The Fate of the Russian Revolution Phoenix Press, London 1998 p297-298

(8)James Twiss: Trotsky and the Problem of Soviet Bureaucracy, Haymarket books Chicago 2015 p406-407

(9)Max Shachtman: Who Owns the State, Matgamna op cit p304-305

(10)Trotsky: Revolution Betrayed, New Park London 1973 p241-242

(11)ibid p249

(12)ibid p249

(13)Max Shachtman: Defend the Soviet Union? In Matgamna op cit p349