THE CHALLENGES FOR TROTSKYISM PART TWO

THE PERSPECTIVES AND PROGRAMMES OF POST-WAR AMERICAN TROTSKYISM

The development of controversy within American Trotskyism was caused by the attitude towards the imperialist war, which was tackled in a previous article. This particular analysis is concerned with the policies, perspectives and programmes of the forces of the American SWP, The Workers Party, and the group around the leadership of CLR James. The initial controversy within the American SWP was caused by the 'Three Theses' of the émigré German group. They questioned the emphasis that was placed upon the aim of the Socialist United States of Europe, which they considered to be an optimistic standpoint given the extent of the influence of reactionary forces in the areas controlled by German and Italian fascism. Felix Morrow was one of the first to reply to this Theses in his article: “Our Differences with the Three Theses” (1) He maintained that he did not disagree with their view that national oppression had become an important issue within occupied Europe, but he disputed with the conclusion that this meant that the aim of the United States of Europe had become an abstraction. Instead it was necessary to connect the aspiration for national liberation with the struggle for the international proletarian revolution in Europe. The problem is that the 'Three Theses' suggests that national liberation is an immediate aim but that its relationship to the united Socialist states of Europe is formal rather than intimately inter-connected. Furthermore, the logic of the 'Three Theses' is to consider the victory of the forces of Anglo-American imperialism to be a progressive establishment of bourgeois democracy and in this context the realisation of the democratic republic would be necessary and the preliminary basis for socialism. In this context Morrow contends that the 'Three Theses' emphasise the role of the national and democratic mass movement in occupied Europe, whilst denying the importance of the role of the proletariat. This means justification for the perspective of apparent unity of the national bourgeoisie and the working class instead of an emphasis on the increasing class antagonism between the proletariat and the national bourgeoisie who collaborate with the Nazi forces: “What is really new in the occupied countries is that the national sentiment of the workers and peasants is sharpening their class bitterness against the collaborating bourgeoisie. National oppression has given a new edge to the class struggle. National sentiment, hitherto serving only the bourgeoisie, today can be used against the bourgeoisie of the occupied countries. That is what is new.”(2)

The problem with this criticism was that it underestimated the weakness of the genuine proletarian forces in occupied Europe, whilst also denying the influence of Stalinism and the forces of bourgeois democracy. In this context the establishment of democratic republics would be a progressive advance and the basis for further and principled struggle for socialism. Morrow, himself was to recognise this point during 1944-45. He began to argue that it was dogmatic for the USA SWP to deny the possibility of the utilisation of bourgeois democratic methods by the forces of Anglo-American imperialism in order to consolidate their influence in what had been occupied Europe. It would be necessary to recognise this situation instead of dogmatically suggesting that only reactionary military dictatorships would be established in order to consolidate the domination of western imperialism. In this context it was necessary to recognise that democratic demands, far from being opportunist, could be utilised in order to advance the interests of the working class, such as the call for a democratic republic in Italy. Furthermore, it was vital to emphasise the reactionary role of the Red Army in Eastern Europe, and indicate its opposition to the interests of the working class and the struggle for proletarian revolution.

In other words, Morrow had realised that events in the period 1943-45 had established that the proletariat was not yet in a situation in which it could directly and immediately promote the aim of socialist revolution. Instead democratic and transitional demands were necessary, such as the call for a democratic republic, which would enhance the ability, if realised, to promote the class struggle of the workers and peasants. In this manner the issue of socialism would become a genuine possibility because the balance of class forces would begin to favour the workers. The realisation of the democratic republic meant that the political conditions would be created that would improve the possibilities to struggle for socialism. Morrow outlined his revised views in the document: 'A Balance Sheet of the Discussion on Europe'(3) He contends that it is a caricature of his views to describe them as expressing illusions in the role of bourgeois democracy, and nor is it based on false views about the economic strength of American capitalism. He contends that his position is based on an attempt to understand reality as it is, and so is not an attempt to impose dogmatic views onto the present situation. He makes the point that only if a mass revolutionary party is formed would the possibility of proletarian revolution become a practical possibility. But if the revolutionary party is small, the advance of the forces of Anglo-American imperialism within Western Europe is likely to realise regimes based on the premises of bourgeois democracy. In contrast the position of the US SWP majority and the Fourth International was dogmatic because they could only consider the creation of new forms of a military dictatorship. This standpoint was based on the following premises: “Military dictatorship as the subjective aim of the imperialists; an aim which they cannot afford to replace by that of bourgeois democracy because “given their democratic rights, the European working class will not require overly much time to organize is revolutionary party, and to overthrow all of its capitalist oppressors.”(4)

Morrow is making the perceptive point that this strategy of the SWP vastly overestimates the current potential of the European working class to become conscious of the task of proletarian revolution. He argues that instead of this situation, the workers are instead supportive of the role of the Anglo-American military intervention and so would be receptive to the aim of the restoration of bourgeois democracy. Hence instead of upholding abstract demands for revolution it would be more feasible and principled to develop democratic demands that connect with the existing consciousness of the workers. In this context it would be vital to develop democratic demands that relate to the task of establishing the most democratic form of regimes, and therefore establish a situation in which the workers can organise in the most effective manner in order to promote their class interests. This approach would not be a denial of the importance of socialism, because the role of the democratic demands would be in order to prepare the possibilities to make further advances towards the realisation of revolutionary struggle. Hence to suggest that the choice is between the installation of military dictatorships or socialist revolution represents a dogmatic standpoint that is not able to evaluate in an objective manner the actual balance of class forces and its political possibilities. Furthermore, the influence of reformist parties is an additional reason why imperialism may be prepared to create political regimes based on bourgeois democracy because they recognise that such a situation will express the possibility to modify the actions of the workers in accordance with the interests of capital. The defenders of the majority standpoint have argued that the new regimes in Italy and France represent military dictatorships because there is no evidence that they are willing to hold democratic elections. But this view ignores the trajectory of these governments which is towards the establishment of features of bourgeois democracy. But crucially these governments have the support of the reformist and bourgeois parties. They have informal support of the majority of the population. But most importantly, Morrow can point to the fact that the most recent resolutions of the majority in the SWP have removed the view that the restoration of bourgeois democracy in Europe is not possible. They have accepted the arguments of the Morrow led minority. Despite suggesting that these regimes will be reactionary and based on opposing the aspirations of the working class, this view does not in any sense conflict with the views of the minority.

The point being made in this analysis of Morrow is that the constant revisions of the majority position are the recognition by its supporters that the basic analysis of the minority has been confirmed by events. This means the view that bourgeois democracy is the major and present form in which counterrevolution is occurring is accepted by the majority. But it is still argued by the majority that Morrow's views are motivated by illusions in the benevolent nature of American imperialism. Morrow argues that this point is a digression from the primary arguments being provided by the minority, which are as follows: “The majority based its denial of the possibility of bourgeois democracy primarily on the subjective aims (methods) of the Allies.....It failed utterly to understand that the subjective aims (methods) of the ruling classes change under the impact of the class struggle. The minority, on the other hand, saw an evolution towards bourgeois democracy in Europe as the objective resultant of the class struggle and of the struggle between the contending capitalist classes. The Allies may not desire this objective resultant, the working class may and in fact strives for something more, nevertheless this is the objective resultant of the conflict between the various forces at this stage.”(5) This comment indicates that the approach of the Morrow faction is not motivated by pessimism but is instead based upon an attempt to understand the political situation in Europe in terms of a precise awareness of the balance of class forces. Such a standpoint is motivated by the knowledge that the revolutionary forces are weak, whilst the Stalinist and reformist parties are undergoing a renewed development of their influence. In this situation the likelihood is that bourgeois democratic regimes will be formed in Western Europe. In this situation, American imperialism has no other option than to accept bourgeois democratic regimes, like that of De Gaulle in France.

The point being made by Morrow is that his position is not based on what he would like to advocate, but is instead an attempt to recognise what is happening in non-dogmatic terms. Hence he is suggesting that the masses have illusions in bourgeois democracy, and so are willing to support the formation of these types of regimes as the alternative to the pro-Nazi puppet administrations. This means that the political necessity should be to develop tactics and strategy that is based on recognition of this situation rather than try to impose dogmatic abstractions in terms of what we would like the situation to be instead of what it is. Ultimately, he suggests that the majority can only try to refute his position by suggesting that he has illusions in the role of American imperialism. But he maintains that all he implied was that the rule of the Allies would not be as predatory as the Nazis. He was not suggesting that American imperialism can have a progressive historical role. Hence it is entirely possible that America will provide goods and machinery for the recovery of the economies of Western Europe, but this does not mean that it will not compete with these countries when their economic have started to develop. The point he is making is that it is entirely possible that economic considerations of the USA can be influenced by political factors such as facilitating the improvement of the economic situation in Western Europe in order to undermine the possibility of proletarian revolution. This development does not mean that the character of American capitalism has changed. (Ironically Morrow is underestimating the future willingness of the American government to support the recovery of the Western European economy as a result of Marshall Plan.) In other words the apparent generosity of the American government is motivated by their opposition to the possibility of revolution in Europe. They are concerned to try and bolster the stability of the emerging bourgeois democratic regimes in Western Europe. To make this point is a matter of empirical fact. It is only disputed by the majority of the SWP because of their dogmatic standpoint.

Most importantly, Morrow outlines how the majority of the SWP has not been able to promote the most appropriate demands in order to relate to the situation in the Western Europe of 1943-45. Instead they insist that the proletarian revolution is on the agenda, and yet can provide no supporting empirical analysis in order to uphold this viewpoint. The point being made is that whilst articles by Trotsky are utilised in order to justify the effective silence about democratic demands by the majority, there is no attempt to understand what is happening in Europe and why slogans like the call for a democratic republic may be important. Indeed, instead of directly replying to the views of the minority, there is effective silence on this matter. In other words the SWP majority prefer confusion rather than accepting that the views of the minority may be correct. The superiority of the position of the minority is that it is based on an attempt to empirically understand the situation in Western Europe, and this is what motivates the call for the role of democratic demands. The utilisation of these demands will enhance the political independence of the working class and assist its ability to strive to realise the United Socialist States of Europe.

The minority was also correct to suggest that the majority was underestimating the possibility of Stalinism to exert a counterrevolutionary influence over Europe. This illusion was connected to the view that the events of the Spanish revolution would not be repeated. But what was being glossed over was the significance of the advance of the Red Army and its connection to the possibility to undermine the development of proletarian revolution. Instead the emphasis of the majority is on the prospects of the European revolution, and the importance of difficulties in this regard is being ignored. The point being made by the minority is that the majority have an inability to understand the empirical developments in the European situation. They are unable to differentiate between the actual character of the immediate and long term situation. Hence they cannot recognise that in the short terms the forces of counterrevolution are being strengthened. This means the Fourth International should have a policy for this situation, and not make dogmatic predictions about the advance of the European revolution. In the West, the immediate situation is one of the generation of bourgeois democracy as the means to undermine the militancy of the mass movement, and this situation requires the promotion of democratic demands, such as the formation of a republic: “All these unfinished tasks are at one and the same time obstacles on the road to socialism and opportunities for the revolutionary party to mobilize the masses in action to achieve them and to sweep beyond them.”(6) The minority also argues that the influence of Stalinism over the European masses is being ignored by the minority, and so its counterrevolutionary implications are glossed over. Thus only the minority is recognising the importance of empirical reality.

This analysis indicates that it is the minority that is trying to recognise the character of the present situation in the period of the end of the Second World War. It would be a caricature to suggest that this standpoint is pessimistic and represents the repudiation of the tasks of proletarian revolution. Instead they are suggesting that the combination of the role of Stalinism and Western Imperialism is able to limit in the short-term the advance of the mass movement, and so this implies that proletarian revolution is not on the immediate agenda. Hence it is necessary to utilise democratic demands in order to promote the class struggle and to generate conscious opposition to both the role of imperialism and Stalinism. In contrast, the majority of the SWP lacks this understanding and cannot provide any tactics to relate to the level of development of the class struggle in Europe. Their analysis is both out-dated and dogmatic.

Morrow outlines in his 'International Report' how the majority is reluctant to call for the withdrawal of Soviets troops from Eastern Europe.(7) This dogmatism is defended in terms of support for a supposed unchanging programme, and it is also argued that American imperialism would not provide economic support to Europe. Furthermore, the influence of democratic illusions within the European working class is denied, and instead it is implied that a revolutionary situation is being generated. What was not being recognised was that Stalinism has become strengthened by the events of the Second World War, and that the formation of revolutionary parties with influence within the working class has not occurred. Hence it was necessary to have tactics for this situation. But instead of realism that recognised that imperialism had overthrown fascism in Western Europe, and that Stalinism posed a problem for the working class in the East, the perspective of the majority was that an imminent proletarian revolution would occur. This standpoint was based on the illusion that the advance of the Red Army would promote the possibility of revolution. Morrow makes the point that this view is the opposite of the truth: “The point is that the will of the bureaucracy was sufficient to prevent risings, rather than risings being dictated to the bureaucracy by statification of property. As to risings which could get out of the control of the bureaucracy – the very possibility did not arise.”(8) Natalia Sedova argued with the SWP majority, and pointed out that the advance of the Red Army could only result in reactionary consequences. Thus the majority effectively try to deny the actuality of Russian oppression of Eastern Europe, and the importance of the national question as a result. Instead of supporting principled policy, the majority perpetuate the illusion that the Red Army is generating the activity of the masses in opposition to capitalism.

Albert Goldman contributes to the criticism of Morrow concerning the majority position on the Soviet Union in his article: 'A Note on the Defence and Nature of Stalinist Russia'(9) He outlines how the Stalinist bureaucracy have undermined the development of the European revolution: “In Eastern Europe the Stalinist armies crushed every attempt on the part of the masses to take power and at the present moment the masses of these countries are practically slaves of the Stalinist bureaucracy. In the important countries of Western Europe the Stalinist parties have gained control over the decisive sections of the working class and have, by their policies prevented any attempt at revolution.”(10) The victory of the Red Army in Eastern Europe is the greatest problem for the generation of the success of revolution. This situation means that defence of the USSR is no longer applicable, and instead the interests of world revolution are primary. He makes the point that occupation of Eastern Europe by the Red Army has led to the plunder of the resources of the dominated countries, and the situation is one of extreme political repression. In this context to continue to defend the USSR because it is a degenerated workers state is to apologise for the repression of Eastern Europe by an occupying army.

This analysis seems to be principled and empirically related to actual developments and not based on dogmatic illusions. Goldman has outlined in precise terms that there is nothing progressive about the Red Army occupation of Eastern Europe. However, he could have mentioned that the national defence of the Soviet Union from German imperialist invasion was both necessary and justified. The point is that the occupation of Eastern Europe by the Red Army was not required in terms of the issue of defence of the Soviet Union. In this context the process of occupation could only be connected to the suppression of any aspect of revolution and national liberation for the countries of Eastern Europe. The majority of the SWP glossed over this aspect of the role of the Red Army and effectively apologised for its counterrevolutionary role in terms of a rigid and over-extended conception of the defence of the USSR. Hence Morrow and Goldman were right to question this approach, and instead to suggest that the tasks of the European proletarian revolution involved the necessity of opposing the occupation of Eastern Europe by the Red Army. This standpoint was connected to the role of utilising democratic demands in Western Europe. This aspect was necessitated by the illusions of the working class in bourgeois democracy, and so it was vital to recognise that the possibility of proletarian revolution would not be a short term task. If this approach had been systematically adopted by the majority of the SWP and Fourth International it could have provided a long-term basis for the re-orientation of Trotskyism in the post war period. Instead, the US SWP adopted James Cannon's 'Theses on the American Revolution'. (11)

This document was an attempt to indicate that the post-war situation was continuing the revolutionary trends of the war period. Cannon outlined the role of the recent militancy of the American working class, but he also reluctantly accepted that economic boom was developing and that: “The real revolutionary prospects in Europe were derailed by the Stalinist and Social Democratic misleaders. Furthermore, US imperialism provided large scale aid for the reconstruction of Western European and Japanese capitalism.”(12) With these brief comments, Cannon reconciled the views of the majority with the Morrow led minority. He accepted the importance of the reactionary role of Stalinism, and the influence of American imperialism in undermining the prospects of revolution in Europe. But in order to also continually justifying the approach of revolutionary optimism, he contends that the powerful character of American capitalism does not mean that the decay of capitalism is not continuing. He categorically denies the possibility of the stabilisation of capitalism, and so ignores the possibility for the USA to revive world capitalism via the role of Marshall Aid. Instead he rigidly proclaims: “The dominant world position of American imperialism now accentuates and aggravates the death agony of capitalism as a whole.”(13) Nothing could be further from the truth. It was the dominant situation of American capitalism which enabled it to promote the revival of the world economy. The forces of American capital recognised that it would be in their interests to promote the development of a dynamic international economic situation. In this context, Cannon is wrong to predict that the American ruling class 'faces more insurmountable obstacles in organising the world'(14) He does not acknowledge that American capitalism has the dynamism to generate the recovery of the world economy, and so he is wrong to suggest that America will be 'subject to the full and direct impact of all the forces and contradictions that have debilitated the old capitalist countries of Europe.”(15) He argues this point by suggesting that the financial costs of the war have been a tremendous drain on the USA economy. This point is true, but it will be the very ability of the American capitalism to promote the revival of the world economy that will provide it with the material means to create progress in the process of accumulation, similar to what occurred after World War One. Nor can Cannon recognise that the forces of American capital can also promote the development of the internal market for goods. Instead Cannon can only predict that the situation of the prosperity of the 1920's will be repeated by the slump conditions of the 1930's. He upholds this view with the standpoint that the arms industry will be a drain on the American economy.

The conclusion to his analysis is that: “Once the internal market is again saturated, no adequate outlet can be hoped for in the unbalanced world market. The enormously augmented productive capacity of the US collides against the limits of the world market and its shrinking capacity. Ruined Europe needs herself to export; so does the ruined Orient, whose equilibrium has been ruptured by the shattering of Japan, its most advanced sector.”(16) Cannon could not recognise that this very situation was an opportunity for the USA. It could re-organise the disorganised world economy to its benefit, via the role of Marshall Aid. This development would encourage the reconstruction of the various domestic economies in Europe and elsewhere in terms of the role of financial support for fragile economies. The very task of the USA was to promote world boom. Hence Cannon crucially miscalculated when he implied that this possibility was beyond the resources of American capitalism. It is also a miscalculation to suggest that war will occur between the USA and USSR which will promote revolutionary developments within the USA. Hence Cannon is being dogmatic when he predicts that economic and political crisis of American imperialism will result in world revolution.

But possibly his most important flaw is to argue that the centre of world revolution, as a result of these economic and political contradictions, will be the USA: “The issue of socialism or capitalism will not be finally decided until it is decided in the US. Another retardation of the proletarian revolution in one country or another, or even one continent or another, will not save American capitalism from its proletarian nemesis at home. The decisive battles for the communist future of mankind will be fought out in the US.”(17) It is one thing to empirically and factually outline how American capitalism is hegemonic in world terms, but it is a matter of dogma and national mechanism to also suggest that it is the centre of world revolution. It is not possible to predict the trajectory of revolutionary developments, but Cannon upholds this idealist perspective because of his belief that revolution in America would result in the demise of world capitalism: “The American revolution with its hundredfold greater power will set in motion revolutionary forces that will change the face of our planet.....This invincible power, merging with the revolutionary movements in all parts of the world, will put an end to the outlived capitalist system as a whole and begin the grandiose task of world reconstruction under the banner of the Socialist United States of the world.”(18) The problem is that this optimistic prediction is based on a flawed economic analysis and the lack of a detailed understanding of the balance of class forces in the USA. Instead the role of hope is projected into a 'scientific' prediction that the USA will be the centre of world revolution. This voluntarist standpoint also provides justification for the further illusion that the problem of bureaucratic degeneration can be avoided in a situation of socialism in one country in the USA. He argues that a workers government in the USA will be able to organise the economy without the problem of bureaucratic degeneration because of its high level of material resources. He ignores the tensions between a national revolutionary regime and the interests of world revolution which may arise if this tension is not resolved by the extension of the international revolutionary process. The issue of bureaucratic degeneration is not simply because of economic backwardness, but is also connected to the role of ideology and strategy.

However, Cannon is on stronger ground when he outlines how the militancy of the American working class has created the possible conditions for revolutionary class struggle. But he does ignore the issue of class consciousness, and the reactionary role of anti-communism within the American working class, and how it combines support for the system with adherence to the principles of trade unionism. But what he tries to ignore most importantly is the fact that the SWP is small and so unable to provide revolutionary leadership. Instead of tackling this issue in a serious manner, he instead dogmatically asserts that: “In the US all the conditions are in the process of unfolding for the rapid transformation of the organised vanguard from a propaganda group to a mass party strong enough to lead the revolutionary struggle for power.”(19) This contradiction is based on flimsy premises because it is connected to the supposed declining role of American capitalism. Hence: “The hopeless contradictions of American capitalism, inextricably tied up with the death agony of world capitalism, are bound to lead to a social crisis of such catastrophic proportions as will place the proletarian revolution on the order of the day.”(20) In this situation it is to be expected that the American workers will go from trade union consciousness to revolutionary aspirations, and the result of this situation will be the generation of the leadership of a revolutionary party. But this perspective is flawed, and is based on a dogmatic assessment of the prospects of American capitalism. Instead the revival of American capitalism would regenerate the world economy, and result in reactionary political developments within the USA. The American working class would begin to combine the role of trade unionism with anti-communism. In this context the possibilities for the growth of a Trotskyist party were very slim. Hence the conception of America as the centre of world revolution was refuted by developments.

But the issue was given this flawed perspective of the US SWP did the rival Workers Party provide a more explanatory and principled approach? Max Shachtman outlined the views of the Workers Party in his programme: 'The Fight for Socialism'(21) He introduces the views of his organisation in terms of a discussion of the importance of production in order to realise human needs, and how this necessity led to the formation of class based societies. The character of slavery and feudalism is outlined, and that the major society of the present is defined as capitalism, which is based on the relations between owners of capital and workers. It is maintained that it is vital that workers understand the capital-labour relationship if they are to bring about genuine change within society. The process of the production of commodities, the increasing concentration of means of production by fewer capitalists, and the situation in which workers sell their labour power for wages is explained. This situation is the basis for the exploitation of the workers, and so the conditions are created for the modern character of class struggle. The character of the exploitative relations of production means that it makes possible the accumulation of capital and the development of the economic system. The major problem with this analysis is that whilst it is a decent summary of the economic views of Marx, it provides no basis to understand the system as it is under the conditions of post-war America. There is a tension between the theoretical analysis and the apparent inability to connect it with the empirical situation after the Second World War. It is one thing to describe the emergence of the monopolies that dominate the American economy, but what is their role in relation to the events of the Second World War? This issue does not seem to be addressed. Instead the accumulation of capital and the exploitation of labour are outlined in a timeless manner. The result of this analysis is that a conclusion is reached that relates to the situation that occurred in the 1930's, and would seem to have little relationship to the post-war period. Hence, Shachtman contends: “The inevitable result of capitalist production is capitalist collapse. Production expands under capitalism only to come to a periodic standstill. Crisis of general over-production can be delayed in appearing, but so long as capitalism exists they cannot be abolished.”(21) This viewpoint ignores the influence of the growing economic role of the state and that the post-war situation indicates the favourable possibilities for an extended growth of world capitalism.

The problem with what has been a theoretical approach for comprehending issues of economics and politics becomes most apparent in terms of the analysis of imperialism and war. The world situation is described in terms of the competition between rival nations based on the importance of monopoly capital, and the actual empirical reality of the USA re-building the world economy is ignored. Instead the present situation is described in terms of the approach of Lenin and his theory of imperialism, and the fact that the colonial empires are being undermined because of the role of American capitalism is ignored. In other words the changing character of imperialism since the Second World War is ignored, and instead the situation is described in terms of the conflict between rival imperialist nations which occurred between 1939 and 1945. Consequently it is argued that: “The imperialist wars of our time, and the part that each side plays in them, are determined by the fundamental nature of imperialism itself. In every capitalist country imperialism is aggressive. It always seeks to expand at the expense of an imperialist rival, for it must expand or shrivel and die....This was the meaning of the first imperialist world war, from 1914-1918. The second world war, which began in 1939, has the same fundamental meaning.”(23) The problem is that this situation was becoming outdated with the replacement of inter-imperialist rivalry with the onset of the cold war and the unprecedented domination of the USA within the capitalist camp. This changing situation meant the necessity to modify perspectives and analysis in order to relate to these new developments. Instead of this reassessment the Workers Party seemed to be justifying the view that the new situation could still be effectively explained with the theoretical approach of the past. This methodology was completely inadequate in relation to the development of the situation of cold war rivalry between the USA and the USSR. It was necessary to elaborate a new theory in order to explain this post-war situation. Instead the Workers Party seemed to be trying to consider new events in terms of a theory which had effectively become antiquated because of changing developments. In this context, the standpoint of the Workers Party was inferior to Cannon's American Thesis which at least tried to explain events since 1945.

However the programme is more topical and relevant when it explains that the possibility for the workers to engage in militant class struggle is often undermined by the privileged leadership of the trade unions. The Workers Party outlines how the unions are based on the principles of separate organisation in order to act in a distinctive manner, or to implicitly accept that the class struggle is an integral aspect of the character of the unions. But under their present bureaucratic leadership the unions also accept the limitations of capitalism. These two conflicting aspects define the contradictory tendencies of the unions. The programme argues that this unsatisfactory situation is upheld by the influential view that the unions should not involve themselves with politics. This view can only strengthen the interests of the capitalist class which does not want the unions to adopt political viewpoints. These limitations could be resolved if the unions supported the formation of a labour party which would express their interests. But in order that the Labour party is principled and truly represents the interests of the workers it should support the aim of a workers government. This would not be about reforming capitalism, but instead express opposing the system. This means nationalising the economy: “It is now in a position to organize production and distribution in a planful and systematic way, and it deprives the reactionary monopolists of the economic power to interfere with production and the functioning of government.”(25) This development would be based on the role of economic democracy: “Production for use, by its very nature, demands constant consultation of the people, constant control and direction by the people. The democratically adopted decision of the people would have to guide the course of production and distribution.”(26) The basis of this possibility is that capitalism already creates the basis for co-operative and social production. The pre-requisites for socialism are created within the existing system. It is argued by the programme that the problem of a bureaucratic elite developing would be overcome by the fact that the character of the workers government is ensured by its democratic character and the participation of the working class.

Hence this aspect of the programme to some extent overcomes the limitations of theoretical dogmatism, and the lack of empirical study of the existing situation, with an emphatic description of the possibilities to form a workers government. The principles of the democratic character of the workers government are outlined, and the view is established that this situation can result in abundance and the resolution of the class contradictions of capitalism. But the programme is also aware that none of this is possible if the working class does not form its own independent Labour party. In other words the Workers Party is aware that it will not be possible to realise the process of socialist transition under its own leadership, but that it is vitally important to form a mass labour party that will be able to relate to the working class is a mass and popular manner. This standpoint seems to be more realistic than the US SWP which contends that it will be possible to achieve revolution under its own leadership. However, the Workers Party is also aware of difficulties with its perspective, in terms of the possibility that a Labour party could become controlled by the opportunist trade union leaders. This would mean the formation of a reformist party that would oppose independent working class action. Hence it is one of the most important tasks of the Workers Party to struggle to develop its influence in order to promote the formation of a Labour party with socialist aims: “If a Labor party is formed under a conservative leadership, the revolutionary socialist party works with progressives for a militant leadership, just as it does in the labor unions themselves. If a Labor party is formed with a reformist program that does not met the requirements of the working class, the revolutionary socialist party works for the adoption of a program based on the class struggle. Against the ideas of capitalism and reformism in the working class, the revolutionary party works for the ideas of socialism.”(26)

Thus despite the dogmatism in its programme, the Workers Party had the most realistic and credible strategy to promote the ideas of socialism within the USA. This was because they recognised the progressive importance of the formation of the Labour party, and so their approach was to campaign for its formation. They understood that their own organisation could not lead the struggle for socialism because of its smallness and isolation. However, this did not mean that the Workers Party could not have a vital role in the class struggle, which was to promote the aim of the formation of a principled Labour party. The support of this aim does not undermine the Workers Party supporting a revolutionary perspective. The programme openly calls for the development of class struggle in order to attain the possibility that the working class can achieve power by revolutionary methods. They reject the role of bourgeois democracy as the method by which the workers can achieve political power. Hence they call for the formation of a workers government which would be elected b workers councils that would be organised in the workplaces. The government would be subject to the supervision of the councils and the principles of recall of its officials would be possible. Hence: “Workers Councils are thus required in order for two purposes: one, to achieve and guarantee the victory of the struggle for workers power, and two, to function as the foundation of the workers government once established.”(27) It is also emphasised that the revolutionary aspirations of the Workers Party does not mean that they are indifferent to the realisation of reforms that improve the situation of the working class under capitalism, and they are also supportive of any genuine democratic improvements to the existing system. In this context it is necessary within bourgeois democratic regimes to oppose the counterrevolutionary threat of fascism. Opposition to imperialist war does not mean support for pacifism, but instead means consistent rejection of the aims of imperialist powers.

However, the correct opposition to Stalinism, which is defined as totalitarian and based on the reactionary system of bureaucratic collectivism, can become one-sided and opportunist as the following comment indicates: “The Communists – or Stalinists, to give them their right name – are the most reactionary force in the labor movement. To be sure, the conservative labor officialdom is capitalistic in its outlook and policies, as has been pointed out. Nevertheless, it seeks, in its own way, and in its own interests, to maintain the labor movement and to oppose totalitarian evasions of democratic rights. This is why it is both possible and necessary to join with it every time it finds itself obliged to lead the labor organizations in a fight or to defend democratic rights.”(29) Thus in the name of anti-communism it is possible that an opportunist accommodation to the leadership of the trade union bureaucracy is being justified and defended. Hence it is not recognised that anti-communism can still be an expression of the ideological interests of the forces of capitalism and opportunism. It is necessary to be careful to ensure that opposition to Stalinism does not accommodate the cold war hysteria of the American ruling class. It is also necessary to recognise that Stalinism is still a part of the working class movement in countries like Italy and France. This means it was necessary to have different policies in relation to whether the emphasis was upon opposing the Stalinist bureaucracy of the USSR, or was about relating to the mass Communist parties of Western Europe.

The last chapter of the programme outlines how state intervention has become important in the post-war world economy, and suggests that this is connected to the increasing influence of state monopoly capitalism. It concludes: “The central planning and organization of production and distribution is the fundament principle of socialism. The concentration of economic power, of production and exchange in the hands of a few monopolies, shows that production has become socialised, whilst ownership has remained private. It shows how simple the reorganization of production on a socialist basis is for the working class today. It has only to take the big monopolies into the hands of its own government, and the foundation stones of socialism are laid. The capitalist class may delay for a time the victory of the working class revolution and the institution of socialism. But it cannot halt the trend which undermines its own economic system, and which is represented by the intervention into, and domination of, all economic life by the government.”(30) The problem with this analysis is that it could become the justification of a type of economic evolutionism which denies the importance of the role of class struggle in the realisation of socialism. Instead it would seem that the most active aspect of the generation of socialism is the inherent logic of capitalism itself. Shachtman tries to deny this conclusion by emphasising the relationship of state monopoly capitalism to the interests of the present economic system, but he has also outlined that the logic of change seems to be an inexorable logic of apparent economic necessity. In this context the role of the class struggle becomes a secondary or passive expression of the process of change brought about by economic imperatives of tendencies of the present system. This point seems to be reinforced by the following comment: “We have said that the deeper and sharper the crisis of capitalism, the more helpless the capitalists become to resolve the crisis – the more the capitalist government is forced to intervene for the purpose of organizing and directing the economy.”(31) The obvious implication and logic of this comment is that the state can only become the expression of the impetus for the realisation of the tendencies of socialism. In this context, capitalism brings about its own demise and so the actual revolutionary role of the working class becomes secondary and supportive to this process of change. This point seems to be reinforced by the connected view that the working class is being deprived of its democratic right to organise by the expansion of the state bureaucracy, so the assumption being made is that the workers are increasingly being deprived of their ability to organise and transform society. Hence the conclusion is that the process of change is as a result of the logic of tendencies within capitalism itself. Thus decaying capitalism is accompanied by the end of democracy. This situation can only be considered an impulse for socialism if the emphasis is placed upon the internal contradictions of capitalism instead of the class struggle. The working class is being repressed simultaneously together with the evolution of state monopoly capitalism towards the promotion of socialism. This apparently illogical view can only be maintained if it is conceived in terms of the decay of capitalism being the new objective basis of social change. Determinism becomes the pretext to relegate the class struggle to a matter of secondary importance.

This standpoint is connected to the view that a decaying capitalism is being undermined by the continuation of inter-imperialist conflict over markets. The logic of inter-imperialist rivalry is towards the realisation of a new inter-imperialist world war. The situation is increasingly the expression of the possibility of new forms of barbarism. Capitalism is undermining itself with the intensification of its own contradictions: “Gone are all those things that once justified capitalism. To restore them, to add to them so that society as a whole may benefit, to lift them to a higher social and historical level, require that capitalism should go.”(31) There is formal reference to the importance of the revolutionary role of the working class, but the emphasis is on the role of the internal processes and contradictions of capitalism in bringing about the possibility of ending the system. This standpoint seems very dogmatic and contradictory because when the Workers Party is also contemplating new inter-imperialist wars. Hence the situation would not seem favourable to the transition to socialism. Primarily Shachtman is unable to connect his evolutionary theory with empirical reality. Hence his principled strategy is undermined by the dogmatic emphasis on a conception of capitalism which does not connect with actual developments and the situation of the absolute domination of the world economy by the USA. Thus for all its faults, the 'American Theses' of Cannon could still be considered to be superior to the approach of the Workers Party.

Given the limitations of post-war Trotskyism does the perspective of CLR James and Raya Dunayevskaya entitled: 'The Invading Socialist Society' present a superior alternative?(32) The article contends that the view of the Fourth International suggesting the Red Army would promote progressive developments has been falsified by events. Instead the Red Army has supressed all expression of the self-activity of the working class in Eastern Europe. Trotsky's view that the Soviet bureaucracy would be defeated by the forces of reaction in the war has also been falsified by events, and the result of this wrong prediction is the confusion of the Fourth International. The point is that the aftermath of the war has led to the development of the USSR as a competitor for capitalism on the world market. But the forces of Stalinism and USA imperialism are united in opposing the possibility of world proletarian revolution. The only progressive result of this situation is the mobilisation of the working class by the method of proletarian democracy in order to realise socialism. The point being made is that this simple truth has been obscured by the Fourth International because of its accommodation to the illusion that Stalinism can be able to promote the interests of the working class in a distorted manner. James and his comrades are contending that the counterrevolutionary activities of the Stalinists in Eastern Europe indicates that only the working class can uphold and promote the expression of its class interests. In contrast the Fourth International leadership has undermined this principled understanding and instead projected a progressive role onto the character of the nationalised property of the USSR. What is being obscured by the leaders of the FI is that a genuine proletarian regime is not based on the importance of nationalisation but is instead the result of democratic self-mobilisation of the workers in organisations based on accountability to their interests. This means the only form of authentic workers state represented the participation of the people in its activity. Instead in order to bestow a progressive role on the activity of Stalinism in its expansion into Eastern Europe this conception of what constitutes a workers state is being compromised. Thus: “Today, revolution must begin with social emancipation. No conceivable force exists in the world to begin the regeneration of society except the emancipated proletariat. The Fourth International must tell the workers that only the free scope of their “own natural and acquired powers” and the “latent socialism” of their class can satisfy their most elementary needs. This is the theoretical basis of the revolutionary international of 1947” (33)

Thus CLR James and his comrades are carrying out an important task of outlining the principles of the self-activity of the working class and its revolutionary possibilities. But what could be problematical in this perspective is whether it results in an over-optimistic appraisal of the current political situation and implies that the possibility of the overthrow of capitalism by the proletariat is imminent. In order to create an approach that is able to relate to events in an empirical manner they will need to have an astute understanding of the balance of class forces. However this point does not seem to be accepted by them when they comment: “With the world socialist revolution the history of humanity will begin. And this is precisely what is shaking the world. Vast millions of men are not thinking and acting as in the old days. They are flexing themselves for a leap that has become imperative for them – the leap from the realm of capitalist necessity into the realm of social freedom. This today is revolutionary politics.”(34) This perspective is very optimistic given that bourgeois democracy has stabilised in the West, and Stalinism has repressive control in the East. Capitalism and Stalinism is dominant, and this should be the context for developing the politics with the aim of the self-emancipation of the working class. Instead James seems to suggest that the aim to develop the self-activity of the working class is only compatible with the most optimistic perspective. In order to uphold his view he implies that the workers’ joining the Communist Parties in Italy and France is an expression of revolutionary possibilities. He admits that Stalinism defeated the mobilisation of the workers in 1944 in Western and Eastern Europe, but he then implies that this is a temporary setback because: “Yet today the self-mobilization of the masses in Italy and France on a national scale has reached such a stage that given serious action of any kind, always decisive for proletarian consciousness, it is bound to overflow the national boundaries.”(35) What is not explained is how the Communist Parties of Western Europe can become agencies of proletarian revolution? James outlines in an impressive manner how the role of Stalinism has been to repress the possibility of proletarian revolution in Europe. But he then effectively ignores this understanding and implies that the revolutionary process will be continued in the form of the role of the major communist parties of France and Italy. Indeed he argues that world revolution is developing, as expressed by what was happening in Japan and the USA. This view that the self-mobilisation of the working class is realising serious proportions is an expression of what must be defined as wishful thinking. But this illusory perspective is then projected onto the role of the Communist parties in France and Italy: “The Stalinist parties where this movement has taken concrete form are not political organizations in the old sense of the term. Behind the smoke screen of democratic parliamentarianism in France and Italy they are social organizations. They symbolize the most profound mass revolt against capital that we have yet seen. They exercise a varying but substantial control in their own way over whole sections of the army, police, banks, production and distribution. They constitute a form of state power within the national state, dominating the private lives of individuals and the intellectual life of the country in all its spheres. It appears as Stalinism in France and Italy.”(36) In this form, James argues the modern role of the proletariat is being expressed.

This understanding is one-sided. It is true that the Communist Parties of France and Italy have become mass popular organisations with large working class membership, but their leadership is still based on the role of traditional Stalinists loyal to the USSR and who reject the importance of democratic control of their organisations. James is right to reject Shachtman's view that the Communist parties are totalitarian, but this does not mean they have become a distorted expression of proletarian revolution. Instead in an anti-fascist form they are reformist and counterrevolutionary. Indeed James seems to contradict himself when he also conceives of Stalinism as being balanced between the contradiction of capital and labour. (37) This contrasting view implies that it cannot become an agency of proletarian revolution. Such a standpoint is clarified and he outlines the following conclusion: “The leadership and policies of the Communist Parties therefore can be summed up as the political form corresponding to the final form of capitalism, state capitalism, which involves, not the expansion of finance capital in the old way, but the incorporation of individual economies operating on a continental scale.”(38) We may have disagreement with the standpoint of state capitalism, but James has defined the mass Communist Parties more accurately as being the expression of a reactionary economic system, and so cannot be even the distorted expression of proletarian revolution. This view seems to contradict his previous approach. He now seems to contend that the role of Stalinism is a reactionary response to the development of the class struggle: “It is the class struggle which is decisive for the policy of Stalinism. If the irreparable bankruptcy of capital leads the Stalinist leadership to break with the national state and look to an established power, it is the driving force of the mass movement which keeps them there. It is only where there is comparatively feeble mass support that the subjective decision is theirs. But with the violent rejection by the masses of bourgeois society and the complete bankruptcy of the national state and national economy, the Stalinist leadership, unable to turn to the masses, must look elsewhere. They are held to the Kremlin by as tight a social bond as held the reformists to the bourgeoisie.”(39)

This comment seems to overcome any sense that the Communist parties can be the distorted agency of the interests of the working class. Instead they are considered to act against the aspiration of the workers and in that manner can only promote the reactionary alternative of the interests of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy. But James then seems to contradict this approach and suggests that it can be in the interests of the working class to advocate the realisation of the political power of the Communist parties in France and Italy: “Any policy based upon the conception that Stalinism can at will destroy the revolutionary proletariat, is a denial of the premises of the proletarian revolution itself.”(40) Thus it is being argued that under certain circumstances it can be principled to provide critical support for the Stalinist parties because this development of their increasing influence can express the activity of the working class. The Communist parties in the West can act differently to how they repressed the working class in the East. Instead it is implied they can become an agency of the working class. This conclusion differs to the view that Stalinism will ultimately express the interests of the Kremlin. The assumption is that the self-mobilisation of the workers can bring about the possibility that the Communist parties in the West will in some sense act according to the interests of the proletariat. In the East the contradiction between the working class and Stalinism has been resolved in favour of state capitalism of the USSR. But he argues that in the West: “The motive force of the Communist parties in Western Europe is the attack on capital.”(41) This situation is considered to be because of the pressure of the working class. But the reality is that the Communist parties have helped to stabilise bourgeois democracy despite the radicalisation of their members. James is under the illusion that the communist parties can reject what has become their reformist role under capitalism, except in Eastern Europe where they are instruments of the aims of domination by the Soviet state.

However whatever the limitations and contradictions of the above analysis, James is able to provide an explanation of the tensions and rivalry between the USA and USSR in terms of the competition between rival state capitalist trusts. He then outlines how the USA is promoting its aim of being the most important economic power in terms of the role of Marshall Aid: “The latest venture is the proposed “Marshall Plan” - a gigantic scheme to reconstruct the shattered economy of Western Europe, and by this means to control its economy and politics completely as an outpost of American trade and a bastion against both Stalinist Russia and proletarian revolution.”(42) This comment indicates that James is the most perceptive commentator about the post-war economic situation and recognises that the methodology of the role of inter-imperialist rivalry has to be modified. He recognises that the role of the USA is to reconstruct the world economy and in this manner to realise its domination. He outlines how American capital has realised the possibility of dominating its former rivals, who have become allies of the USA in order to oppose the threats posed by the USSR.

But he also makes the dogmatic conclusion that the formation of national states is becoming impossible in a world dominated by rival state capitalist trusts. The logic of his perspective is that the basis to oppose the Stalinist domination of Eastern Europe is not through the formation of independent national states but instead by the proletarian struggle for international revolution. He criticises both Mandel and Shachtman for their contrasting calls for the national independence of Poland and instead suggest that this slogan means accommodation to various bourgeois politicians. But the problem with this view is that it ignores the necessary national dimension to the situation in Poland caused by the domination of Stalinism. The point is that the development of struggle by the working class against Stalinism will have an inherent national form. Furthermore, only in the form of establishing a national workers government in Poland will it be possible to then strive for the development of a United Socialist Europe. In contrast, James seems to imply that the era of progressive national states is over, and the only aim should be the striving for a United Socialist states. This approach represents an ultimatistic approach and ignores the fact that class struggle will have an initial national form.

James outlines cogently how it is necessary to oppose all views that compromise the aim of international proletarian revolution. He contends that Mandel is accommodating to this opportunist standpoint in implying that Stalinism can overcome capitalism in a bureaucratic but progressive manner. In contrast, he argues that the approach of Shachtman accommodates to the interests of the bureaucracy of the trade unions. He argues in terms of an alternative that the social and economic conditions of the working class are intolerable and this situation is promoting the development of the beginning of international class struggle. This point has not been recognised by the Fourth International which is trying to develop clever tactics in order to promote its advance and growth. The cautious perspectives of the Fourth International mean that it has compromised the following approach: “The basis, the spearhead of Bolshevism in our time is the uncompromising presentation of the needs and the methods of social revolution. Nothing else can be its basis.”(43) Transitional demands must be made for the working class to prepare for revolution. This possibility is being promoted by the fact that barbarism is being generated by the continued crisis of capitalism and Stalinism, and the working class has repeatedly indicated its willingness to struggle in recent years. In Western Europe the Communist parties with difficulty are acting to restrict and undermine the development of mass movements for social change. The conclusion is that: “Every passing day shows to the proletariat that its nearest every-day immediate needs can be satisfied only by actions of the most far reaching historical character. The struggle for power therefore becomes the main objective of the revolutionary education of the masses.”(44)

The problem with this perspective is that it does not recognise that a situation of stabilisation has arisen in Europe. To call for the formation of a workers militia, or for the proletariat to reconstruct the economy, is an optimistic view of the level of the class consciousness of the proletariat. James is making the mistake that the economic situation, which is still one of crisis and problems, is being expressed by the receptiveness of the working class for the aim of revolution: “The ruin of the economy is complemented by the demonstrated need and desires of millions of workers to finish once and for all with the slavery of capitalist production and to exercise to the full the vast productive capacities created by them in capitalism, the experience of the Russian revolution has proved beyond a shadow of doubt that workers control of production is the deepest expression of proletarian democracy and that without it, it is impossible to solve the basic antagonisms of value production.”(45) This is a principled perspective, but it is not based on an astute understanding of the balance of class forces. The situation is stabilising and the workers are not receptive to the aims of workers control. Indeed the prediction that the Marshal plan will be unsuccessful represents an inability to recognise that the conditions for the recovery of the world economy are being promoted by this plan. This prediction is ironic given his acknowledgement of the importance of the Marshall plan. Hence in the context of economic recovery and political stability the call for the formation of a workers government is very optimistic. Thus the following perspective of imminent revolution was falsified by events and the consolidation of the domination of American capitalism and Stalinism: “Never was the proletariat so ready for the revolutionary struggle, never was it more certain that the proletarian upheaval, however long delayed, will only the more certainly take humanity forward in the greatest leap forward it has hitherto made.”(46)

We can admire the optimism of James, and his attempt to develop the most optimistic perspective for the Fourth International. But we cannot deny that his standpoint was inaccurate and expressed a flawed understanding of the economic and political situation. James ultimately argued that the inability of capitalism to achieve recovery was because of the militancy of the working class, this view meant he was unable to recognise that the very process of the stabilisation of capitalism did result in a situation in which the stabilisation of capitalism was being realised. He was unable to predict this possibility because his whole approach was based on the view that the economic and political situation was converging in the generation of mass struggles. Hence he could not recognise that the period of revolutionary change had been resolved in favour of the bourgeoisie. What was more constructive and feasible was to develop the method of Morrow and to utilise the programme of democratic demands in order to promote the possibility of connecting the working class with its revolutionary party. Instead of this more realistic approach various forms of a dogmatic view were being justified by the various tendencies constituting the Fourth International.

Footnotes:

(1) Felix Morrow: Our Differences with the Three Theses, (1942) Marxist Internet Archive p1-5

(2) ibid p4

(3) Felix Morrow a Balance Sheet on the Discussion on Europe (March 1945) Marxist Internet Archive p1-44

(4) ibid p10

(5) ibid p22-23

(6) ibid p42

(7) Felix Morrow: International Report (1946) Marxist Internet Archive, p1-21

(8) ibid p15

(9) Albert Goldman: A Note on the Defence and Nature of Stalinist Russia (1946), in Marxist Internet Archive p1-5

(10) ibid p2

(11) James Cannon: Theses on the American Revolution (1946), Marxist Internet Archive p1-15

(12) ibid p2

(13) ibid p3

(14) ibid p3

(15) ibid p3

(16) ibid p8

(17) ibid p9

(18) ibid p10

(19) ibid p14

(20) ibid p14

(21) Max Shachtman: The Fight for Socialism (1946), Marxist Internet Archive

(22) ibid Chapter three p18

(23) ibid chapter four p9

(24) ibid chapter seven p2

(25) ibid chapter seven p6

(26) ibid chapter eight p5

(27) ibid chapter eight p12

(28) ibid chapter eight p26

(29) ibid chapter nine p4

(30) ibid chapter nine p5

(31) ibid chapter nine p11

(32) CLR James and Raya Dunayevskaya: The Invading Socialist Society (1947) in Marxist Internet Archive

(33) ibid p11

(34) ibid p12

(35) ibid p14

(36) ibid p20

(37) ibid p23

(38) ibid p24

(39) ibid p24-25

(40) ibid p26

(41) ibid p31

(42) Chapter three p2

(43) Chapter five p18

(44) ibid p22

(45) ibid p24

(46) ibid p28