UNDERSTANDING TROTSKY’S POLITICS

One of the most influential recent biographies of Trotsky has been that of Robert Service: “Trotsky: A biography” (Macmillan: London 2009) He summarises his views in the following manner: “Trotsky was wrong in many cardinal aspects of his case. Stalin was no mediocrity but rather had an impressive range of skills as well as a talent for decisive leadership. Trotsky’s strategy for communist advance anyway had little to offer for the avoidance of an oppressive regime. His ideas and practices laid several foundation stones for the erection of the Stalinist political, economic, social and even cultural edifice. Stalin, Trotsky and Lenin shared more than they disagreed about. As for the charge that Stalin was an arch bureaucrat, this was rich coming from an accuser who had delighted in unchecked administrative authority during the years of his pomp. Even Trotsky’s claim that Stalin was uninterested in aiding foreign communist seizures of power fails to withstand scrutiny. Moreover, if communists had been victorious in Germany, France or Spain in the inter-war years its banner holders would have been unlikely to have retained their power. And if ever Trotsky had been the paramount leader instead of Stalin, the risks of a bloodbath in Europe would have been drastically increased. Trotsky prided himself on his ability to see Soviet and international affairs with realism. He deceived himself. He had sealed himself inside preconceptions that stopped him from understanding the dynamics of contemporary geopolitics…. The point is that whoever governed the USSR effectively stood in the need of deeply authoritarian methods to conserve communist power.” (p3) But the point is that Trotsky’s self-confidence or even arrogance was based on his determination to promote the possibility of the realisation of a socialist revolution in Russia and in international terms. He was not primarily concerned with self-interest, in contrast to Stalin, but was instead motivated by the issues involved in trying to advance the realisation of the aim of overthrowing capitalism and in that manner promoting the development of socialism. It could be argued that his approach was flawed and was unable to realise these objectives, but this was not as a result of his personality but was instead because of unfavourable social circumstances. His approach was based on the importance of cooperation with the leadership of Lenin, and in terms of the promotion of party unity after Lenin. He rejected his Menshevism not because of personal ambition but instead because he recognised that the politics of this group no longer corresponded with the interests of advancing the development of international proletarian revolution. It could be suggested that aspects of his political practice expressed the aspects of bureaucratic elitism, but this very development was motivated by concerns about the interests of the proletarian revolutionary process. Therefore, unlike Stalin he was not primarily motivated by ambition but instead connected this aspect to the aims of the development of the international revolutionary process. Hence in some respects his personality resembled that of Lenin, even if he still lacked Lenin’s supreme confidence. After Lenin he considered that his approach was based on the purpose of continuing the legacy of Lenin and so defined the role of the Soviet Union in terms of the advancement of the aim of international revolution. But he lacked Lenin’s decisiveness and so was unable to form an alliance with Bukharin in order to oppose the domination of Stalin. Instead in nostalgic terms he formed an ineffective alliance with Zinoviev and Kamenev, and this led to defeat in the inner party struggle. But in terms of politics Trotsky was ultimately vindicated by his view that only the success of the international proletarian revolution would be the basis to overcome the problem of the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet regime. However, his attempt to create a new Fourth International was undermined by its sectarian character and the inability to develop alliances with left wing groups like the Independent Labour party of the UK. Ultimately his aim of creating a principled alternative to Stalinism and Social Democracy was undermined by the problem of sectarianism. However, he did outline a principled and credible programme for revolutionary change which came to be known as the transitional programme. This could have become the basis to develop an alternative Fourth International but this possibility was undermined by the inability of this organisation to connect to the left wing elements in Social Democracy and centrist groups. In other words, the ultimate problem of what became Trotskyism was undermined by its failure to connect the principles of Marxism with a flexible tactical approach. The ultimate result was the division of Trotskyism and the related problems of trying to create a credible alternative expression of International Marxism. It could be argued that these problematical developments were inevitable and the result of the marginalisation of Trotskyism, but it could also be suggested that it was always undermined by serious theoretical and political problems that ultimately led to the opportunist degeneration of many of the Trotskyist groups. But contrary to Service’s approach the limitations of Trotsky’s politics were not caused by a self-interested personality, but instead because the standpoint of Trotsky never came to define the character of Russian and international Marxism, except for a brief period in 1917.

In other words, the limitations of Trotsky were not caused by an arrogant personality, but instead the opposite problem of aspects of indecision and uncertainty in his approach that caused problems in his struggle with Stalin. The point is that ultimately, he lacked the sense of self-belief of Lenin, and this resulted in problems in connection to the development of an effective form of opposition to the establishment of the ascendency of Stalin within the party after 1924. This problem was not caused by his politics which was based on a principled attempt to relate the role of the Soviet Union to the interests of world revolution. Instead, what was the issue is the personality of Trotsky which meant that he rejected the necessity to try and develop a pragmatic approach which could have led to an alliance with Bukharin against Stalin. He did not understand that the New Economic Policy was not an opportunist economic approach and was instead the basis to establish the development of an alliance of the workers and peasants that could generate the development of the material and political conditions to advance the creation of socialism within the USSR. Indeed, it could be argued that whilst he essentially rejected the NEP, he did not provide a coherent conception of what should be an alternative economic approach in order to promote the possibility to build socialism. However, he was at his strongest when criticising the opportunist limitations of the Soviet communist party with regards to its attitudes concerning the British general strike and the development of the Chinese revolution. In other words, he provided a principled basis for the advance of international communism but was unsure about what should be the correct approach for the development of socialism within the USSR. However, the genuine character of Trotsky meant that he would be a better leader than the egotistical and unprincipled Stalin. He would have ensured the continuation of the connection of the USSR to the aims of international revolution and would have not undermined the attempt to realise the success of the struggle for world socialism. Hence the ultimate vindication of Trotsky is that his leadership would have been a principled alternative to the opportunism of Stalin. He would have maintained the attempt to relate the interests of the USR to the progress of world socialist revolution. Hence Trotsky would not have become the expression of the interests of the creation of a bureaucratic social formation. This is not to suggest that such a development could not have occurred under Trotsky’s leadership, but such a possibility would have been the unintended outcome of adverse conditions rather than something that was actually promoted by the opportunist leadership of Stalin.

Therefore, the historical vindication of Trotsky is that he would have expressed the interests of the workers of the Soviet Union and the international working class. This does not necessarily mean that his leadership would have been successful in the establishment of socialism in national and international terms, but failure would have been caused by the problems generated by an adverse economic and political situation. However, Service questions this type of conclusion with his emphasis on the apparent arrogance of the personality of Trotsky: “Trotsky is usually regarded as a person with qualities that put him in a different category to Stalin. It is true that Stalin did things of a monstrosity which only few dictators in the twentieth century matched. But Trotsky was no angel. His lust for dictatorship and terror was barely disguised in the Civil War. He trampled on the civil rights of millions of people including the industrial workers. His self-absorption was extreme.” (p4) However despite an aspect of validity to this comment, the struggle of Trotsky against Stalin was based on the perspective of the revival of Soviet democracy and the genuine promotion of the aim of international revolution. Service establishes his critical views about Trotsky in terms of the authoritarian character of the aim of the primary role of the party for the establishment of socialism, but the point is that the type of party that was being advocated was different to that which was being developed by Stalin. The point is that Trotsky wanted to develop a type of revolutionary government that was responsive to the interests of the workers and peasants and which in a principled manner would advance the aim of the development of international socialist revolution. Hence, he was ultimately opposed to the attempt of Stalin to create a new type of bureaucratic society based on the domination of the party elite. Instead, he wanted to maintain a principled relation of party and class in terms of the advancement of the aim of world revolution. Indeed, it would be support for this aim which would undermine the realisation of any tendencies for the bureaucratic development of the social formation in the Soviet Union. It could be argued that this approach was not feasible and practical, and so the standpoint of Trotsky was flawed. This is a serious criticism which can be made but the point is that the motives of Trotsky were based on a sincere attempt to advance the realisation of world revolution and to create an authentic socialist society in the USSR. It could be argued that his ultimate defence of the single party regime could not realise these aims, but this does not mean that his intensions were not genuine and principled. The point is that he was not motivated by the same aims as Stalin. Stalin aimed to create a regime of the domination of the party over society. In contrast, Trotsky envisaged the role of the party as bringing about the genuine liberation of the people in terms of the creation of socialism. It could be argued that ultimately his approach to this issue was impractical and problematical, but this did not mean that his overall perspective was not principled and genuine. He was motivated by the aim of creating socialism in national and international terms. In contrast we cannot suggest that Stalin had similar motives, and instead wanted to establish the domination of the party within Soviet society in both economic and political terms. This difference was the very reason why it was principled and necessary to support Trotsky’s opposition to the development of the consolidation of Stalin’s political power. But Service’s emphasis on the importance of the arrogance of Trotsky’s personality obscures an understanding of this point. It is necessary to recognise that Trotsky’s arrogance was based on a motivation of an attempt to advance the interests of socialism in national and international terms.

Service outlines how when Trotsky became an important Marxist his early alliance with Lenin was ended and instead he criticised what he considered to be the elitism of Lenin and the Bolsheviks: “What Lenin was proposing was ‘political substitutionism’. There, would be no dictatorship of the proletariat under the Bolsheviks but a ‘dictatorship over the proletariat’. The party would substitute itself for the workers, the central leadership for the party and the leader for the central leadership. In place of ‘proletarian socialism’ the followers of Lenin would install more Jacobinism.” (p82) In other words: “This brilliant exposition was prophetic in many basic respects. The October revolution was to put the Bolsheviks in power, and soon after forming a government they would give up hearkening to popular opinion after millions of workers had turned against them. The proletariat was never given the chance to dictate the size of its food rations, for less to choose who was going to rule.” (p82) However it could be suggested that this apparently prophetic character of the analysis of Trotsky in 1903 is not the most important aspect of the critique carried out by Trotsky. This is because what his work of this period was trying to establish was that the workers could become supportive of a principled revolutionary programme that was based on the aim of the realisation of their class interests. It would be the development of this dynamic and principled relationship between party and class which would become the basis to establish the possibility to promote a principled struggle against Tsarism. He was already implying that the workers could become supporters of a revolutionary programme of an anti-capitalist character. The point that Service seems to ignore is that Trotsky’s primary concern was to understand how a principled relationship of party and class could be developed. In this sense he was already implying that the primary issue was to promote the development of the revolutionary role of the working class because of the ultimately reactionary role of the national bourgeoisie. Hence the problem with the Bolsheviks was their elitism which seemed to ignore the importance of revolutionary strategy. The point being made was that the workers could become revolutionary opponents of the Tsarist regime and so in this sense the Bolshevik assumption that they could only develop a bourgeois democratic consciousness was a pessimistic assumption. Instead, the very collective character of the workers, which led to the formation of trade unions, also meant that they could become receptive to the message of a revolutionary Marxist programme. Therefore, the formulation of Lenin that the workers could only spontaneously develop an economistic or bourgeois type consciousness was a pessimistic view that underestimated the potential of their capacity to develop radical ideas because of the role of collective mass action. In this context the revolutionary party could achieve support for a revolutionary programme because it connected to the necessity to develop the potential of the mass struggle of the workers. Hence the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks underestimated the dynamism of the role of the workers because of their rigid understanding of revolutionary perspectives which was based on the immediate objective of trying to establish a liberal democratic regime. Trotsky had not yet formulated his theory of permanent revolution, but his criticism of Lenin anticipated this development. He was already aware that the workers under a Tsarist regime were discontented and so could become receptive to the message of a revolutionary programme of struggle. His criticism of the Bolsheviks in this period became the basis for his support of Parvus’s development of the objective of permanent revolution. Service supports this conclusion of Trotsky’s views in the period 1903-1904 when he comments: “The proletariat ought to go it alone. It had t leave every other social group with a genuine dedication to transforming society. No other class could do this. Workers would be the salvation of Russia and the then of the rest of the world.” (p83) In other words the point being made is that Trotsky’s criticism of the elitism of Lenin was not unprincipled. He was essentially criticising Lenin for underestimating the revolutionary potential of the working class. It was implicitly being suggested that the very struggles of the workers could provide the basis for their radicalisation and so would become receptive to accepting the views of Marxism. Hence the problem with the elitism of Lenin was that he could not recognise this possible development and outcome of the process of the relationship of the militancy of the workers with increasing acceptance of the approach of Marxism. In other words, this critique of Leninism was progressive and principled because it was based on the view that the development of the collective struggles of the workers could generate the possibility for the increased influence of the Marxist approach. Therefore, what was being implicitly suggested was that a programme for the promotion of the mass struggle of the workers could result in the increased influence of Marxism. This development could create the conditions for the development of interaction between Marxism and the workers. In contrast Lenin’s ‘What is to be Done’ was problematical because the elaboration of the importance of a trade union consciousness within the working class did not seem to outline how this influence could be overcome apart from dogmatic reference to the increased influence of the Marxist party. But Trotsky was already establishing that the process of struggle would be the very basis by which the workers would become receptive to the ideas of Marxism. However, what was not yet elaborated was a strategy that would express this possible development. Instead at the level of principles Trotsky was outlining the possible aspects involved in the generation of the influence of Marxism within the working class. He was to clarify this perspective in relation to his development of a strategic perspective connected to the development of the revolution of 1905. His theoretical work between 1903-04 enabled him to elaborate the theory of permanent revolution alongside the contribution made by Parvus.

Service considers that this approach was a justification of elitism: “He conceded that the projected workers government would lack the ‘social base for an independent Jacobin democracy’. By this he seems to have meant that the Jacobins in the French revolution had been able to call up support from broad layers of the lower classes throughout the country. The working class in Russia was as yet too still too small for that purpose. Very well, concluded Trotsky, Marxists in Russia should fight for a dictatorship of the revolutionary elite – and it would be a dictatorship led by the Russian Social Democratic party.” (p90) But Service contradicts this conclusion when he outlines the important and dynamic role of Trotsky in the Soviets. This very recognition of the dynamic role of Trotsky within the Soviets was an indication that Trotsky considered that this popular and mass organisation of the workers was essential for the possibility of achieving successful revolutionary change in 1905. This approach was connected to the view that only the mass organisations of the workers could establish genuine democracy which would express the possibility for change. In an article: “Up to the Ninth of January” he comments: “We have no democratic traditions; we have to create them. This is possible only through revolution. A party of democracy can be nothing other than a party of revolution. This idea must penetrate social consciousness; it must penetrate our political atmosphere; the very word ‘democracy’ must have revolution for its content, so that even touching it will burn the fingers of our liberal opportunists, who try to convince their friends and enemies that they become democrats the moment they call themselves democrats”(Leon Trotsky: ‘Up to the Ninth of January’ In Richard Day editor of ‘Witnesses to Permanent Revolution’ Haymarket books, Chicago 2009 p308) This understanding is related to an explicit perspective of the aim of the development of a political general strike. The ultimate aim of this development would be the realisation of the creation of the Constituent Assembly. This shows that just before the actual outbreak of the 1905 revolution Trotsky connected the importance of the potential militancy of the workers with the aim of the creation of a democratic republic that would not necessarily have as its immediate objective the formation of a worker’s government. Hence it was the actual development of the role of the Soviets in the 1905 revolution which led him to radicalise his perspectives and to connect this situation which the perspective of permanent revolution, or the connection of the aspect of bourgeois democratic revolution with the importance of proletarian revolution.

In the article ‘After the Petersburg Uprising: What Next’ (Day p337-350) Trotsky outlines how the workers are the most dynamic and important agency of the process of what is becoming the possibility of revolutionary change. In this context it would become unprincipled and opportunist to reject the necessity to develop the struggle of the workers to try and change the character of Russian society because of a dogmatic emphasis on the apparent backward character of society. Trotsky summarises the approach of the demands of the class struggle that were posed in 1905: “Social Democracy aspires to be, and must be, a conscious expression of objective development. But, once the moment arrives when the objective development of the class struggle confronts the proletariat, at a certain stage of the revolution, with the alternative of taking upon itself the rights and duties of state power or else surrendering its class position, Social Democracy makes the conquest of state power its immediate objective. In doing so, it does not in the least ignore the deeper processes of growth and concentration of production. But it does say that, once the logic of class struggle, which in the final analysis, depends on the course of economic development, drives the proletariat to establish its dictatorship even before the bourgeoisie has ‘exhausted’ its economic mission (it has hardly even begun its political mission), this can only mean that history has imposed upon the proletariat tasks of colossal difficulty. It may be that the proletariat will become exhausted in the struggle and even collapse under this weight – that is a possibility. Nevertheless, it cannot evade these tasks without risking class demoralisation and descent of the entire class into barbarism.” (p510) It was the very character of the political developments of the 1905 revolution which vindicated this perspective of Trotsky. The workers did create the popular organisation of the Soviet and their promotion of the general strike created changes that could have resulted in the formation of a Constituent Assembly. In other words, the very activity of the workers was an indication of the credibility of the programme of change of Trotsky and Parvus. Trotsky outlines the permanent character of the process of mass struggle in the following terms: “The proletariat is the sole force leading the revolution and the principal fighter on its behalf. The proletariat seizes the entire field and is never satisfied, nor will it be ever satisfied, by any concession; through every respite or temporary retreat it will lead the revolution to the victory in which it will take power.” (Day p511) But what seems to be unexplained is the role of a revolutionary party in this process of change. It would seem that the process of mass struggle and its possible victory does not seem to involve the role of a revolutionary party. This apparent perspective would seem to be effective in terms of the ability of the Saint Petersburg Soviet of 1905 to call general strikes and to pose an effective challenge to the domination of Tsarism. But the defeat of the Soviet and its decline in importance seemed to have indicated the importance of the role of a revolutionary party. But Trotsky seemed to have an ambiguous political role because of his ambiguous relation to the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. He was able to have an outstanding individual political role in the revolution of 1905, but ultimately his effectiveness was undermined by a failure to connect with the role of the Mensheviks or Bolsheviks. He attempted to reject the possible problems in his by suggesting that his approach was based on the principled perspective of establishing the political power of the Soviets: “The Russian working class of 1906 bears absolutely no resemblance to that of Vienna in 1848. These evidence for that is the fact that Soviets of workers deputies are springing up throughout Russia. They were not conspiratorial organisations that were prepared in advance and seized power over the proletarian masses at the moment when the excitement breaks out. No, these organs were deliberately created by the masses themselves to coordinate their revolutionary struggle. And these Soviets, elected by the masses and responsible to them as unconditionally democratic institutions, are pursing the most resolute class policy in the spirit of revolutionary socialism. This is still far from having a provisional government, and they might ultimately amount to nothing – but we certainly see here the future organs of support for a provisional government. The entire activity of the workers Soviets clearly demonstrates that the politics of the Russian proletariat in power will be a new and colossal step forward by comparison with the Commune of 1871.” (Day p518) But the problem with this perspective is that it does not establish how the workers will be able to exercise political power. How can this task be realised without the mediation of the role of a political party? In this sense the approach of Lenin seemed to be more coherent and explanatory because he explicitly argued in favour of a revolutionary government based on the role of the parties of the workers and peasants. There are obviously also problems with this perspective but at least the merits of Lenin’s approach were that his conception of a revolutionary governments seemed to be more precise and explanatory when compared to Trotsky’s vague call for a soviet administration. What seemed to be ignored is that a soviet government would have to be mediated by the role of the parties of the workers, but Trotsky does not seem able to make this point in a coherent manner. Hence whilst it could be suggested that Lenin’s approach had aspects of elitism at least it has the merits of clarity. In contrast Trotsky does not seem to establish with clarity what he means by a worker’s government of the soviets. How could such an administration be possible without the important mediating role of political parties? But despite these problems the merit of Trotsky’s approach is that he does establish the importance of the principle of the aim of achieving a genuine government based on the involvement and interests of the workers. This issue was to become of importance in relation to developments after the October revolution of 1917. Ironically the establishment of an elitist Bolshevik government indicated the important necessity to develop genuine Soviet democracy and so in relation to developments in the period after 1917 indicated the ultimate significance of the perspectives that Trotsky had between the period 1905-1906. However, it could be argued that in 1917 Trotsky became a dogmatic supporter of the role of the party as the expression of the interests of the working class.

Service considers that Trotsky’s perspective of the realisation of the aim of a Soviet government was effectively an expression of his own ambitions and was not principled or the expression of perspectives. He comments: “By preserving with his strategic perspective, at any rate, Trotsky rendered himself irretrievably lost to the Mensheviks, and his penchant for a ‘workers government’ kept him apart from the Bolsheviks. Yet he was not lost to the party as a whole. He continued to campaign for organisational unity. To many in the party it appeared that Trotsky had no principles. The Bolsheviks simply could not understand how he could advocate a ‘workers’ government and yet fail to savage a faction that espoused alliance with the parties of the bourgeoisie. Only one answer seemed plausible to the Bolsheviks: Trotsky was surely more interested in heading a reunited Russian Social Democratic party than in making a revolution. The Mensheviks agreed, overlooking his refusal to entangle himself in organisational intrigues…He acquired the reputation of being an adventurer without ideological commitment. In a faction ridden Marxist movement his openness to all sides in every dispute made him many enemies. He was not to be trusted. On this, Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were at one.” (p113) But this assumption that Trotsky was ambitious and motivated by individual interests sems to be at odds with his advocacy of an effective perspective of permanent revolution which seemed to have isolated within the forces of the Social Democrats. He was actually primarily motivated by what he could understand to be the character of the process of the struggle for revolutionary change. He criticised the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks for not recognising the potential of the struggle of the workers in 1905 and the related importance of the role of the Soviets. It was his actual support for a revolutionary perspective which isolated him within the Social Democrats. In contrast the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks were undermined by their advocacy of a dogmatic perspective that had failed to recognise the importance of the formation of the Soviets in the 1905 revolution. In contrast Trotsky had become an active participant in the Soviets and had developed a perspective concerned with their possible role in the struggle to overthrow the domination of Tsarism. It was this advocacy of a revolutionary approach which effectively isolated from the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks who had more dogmatic conceptions of the revolutionary process in Russia. But Trotsky had established the credibility of his approach by relating theory to practice in relation to the events of the 1905 revolution. His effective leadership of the Soviet suggested that change by the workers was a credible possibility. In contrast the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks were marginalised by their support for antiquated perspectives and only become relevant by becoming reluctant supporters of Trotsky’s approach. Therefore, the criticisms of Trotsky made by the Bolsheviks after the 1905 revolution, and outlined by Service, had no credibility. Trotsky had shown himself to be a genuine supporter of the objective of proletarian revolution, and so the criticisms of the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were without justification. Instead, Trotsky could claim with credibility that the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks had put their own sectarian concerns above the interests of the working class and the development of successful revolutionary change. Trotsky attempted to establish the credibility of his views by trying to promote the unity of the Social Democrats in the period 1910-12. He promoted the role of a unified party congress. This was partially successful in terms of the participation of the Mensheviks, but ultimately the problem was that the Mensheviks did not agree with the revolutionary perspectives of Trotsky. Ultimately Trotsky was isolated because of his rejection of what he perceived to be the sectarianism of the Bolsheviks, yet he also had criticisms of the opportunism of the Mensheviks.

With the development of the first world war Trotsky upheld the policy of peace without annexations and a United Europe. This seemed to contrast favourably with the national chauvinism of the majority of Social Democratic parties and the apparent sectarian support of revolutionary defeatism by the Bolsheviks, which they rejected in 1917 in support of an approach similar to that of Trotsky. Service outlines how Trotsky was isolated in the period of the first world war: “Yet nobody quite knew what to make of him. As a party leader he had been an indefatigable unifier and it was only just before the war that he started to be choosy about who could belong to the Russian Social Democratic party. His wartime achievements were hardly gargantuan and was limited to his achievements as a journalist. No one could predict that this solitary revolutionary was about to make a name for himself as one of the most influential figures in twentieth century world history.” (p150) But this comment does not seem to have been accurate in that Trotsky and Martov established cooperation in promoting the aims of internationalism and socialism in this period. The point is that Trotsky was able to promote a distinctive and yet principled perspective of the relation between the realisation of peace as an expression of the possibility to develop progress towards socialism. Trotsky’s isolation was ended by the events of 1917 which led to the events of the February revolution in Russia. This led to the unity of Lenin and Trotsky in terms of support for a revolutionary perspective of the aim of Soviet power. In other words, Trotsky’s perspective had been vindicated in terms of the importance of the Soviets in 1917. They were the basis for the credibility of the bourgeois Provisional government and so Lenin and Trotsky could unite in terms of calling for ‘All Power to the Soviets’.

Service outlines how Trotsky became the dynamic expression of the development of the proletarian revolutionary process: “From that day onwards he was the public face of Bolshevism until Lenin emerged from his place of hiding. Whenever the leading Bolsheviks appeared together on the party’s behalf it was Trotsky everyone wanted to see and hear. Of the Bolsheviks, neither Kamenev or Zinoviev cam near to him in popular appeal. Lenin was secluded in Helsinki and could make no impact except through newspaper articles which were unread by most people.” (p178) On the basis of this understanding Service outlines the crucial and important contribution of Trotsky to the development of the success of the revolutionary process. But what is not outlined is how Trotsky elaborated a perspective based on the relationship of the role of the Soviets to the character of the role of a revolutionary process of change. Only the importance of the Soviets could establish the credibility of the aim of radical change. But what this approach did not establish was the relations of party and class. How could the process of government be expressed without the aspect of the importance of the revolutionary party as the basis of the administration of society? In other words, Trotsky effectively ignored the relation of party to the institution of the soviet and instead acted to express the aims of the party in terms of the role of the soviet. In this manner he was insistent that the soviet be considered to be the expression of the objectives of the revolutionary process, and so the October revolution was carried out in terms of the importance of the soviet. But in practice this approach could only be practically expressed in the aspect of the role of the revolutionary party of the Bolsheviks. In this manner the outcome of the 1917 revolution was the creation of the importance and dynamism of the Bolsheviks, and so this meant that the significance of the Soviets could only be expressed in these terms. Hence it could be suggested that the creation of a one-party regime as the outcome of the revolutionary process was inevitable. But this meant that the Bolsheviks should have tried to create the conditions for the development of a coalition government, but such a possibility was undermined by the intransigence of the Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks. Furthermore, the creation of the Constituent Assembly also created new possibilities for a coalition government, but this prospect was undermined by the intransigence of the Social Revolutionaries who effectively opposed any possibility of compromise with the Bolsheviks.

But Service seems to ignore these factors and instead exclusively blames the intransigence of the Bolsheviks for the development of increasing economic and political crisis: “At any rate the coalition of Bolsheviks and Left Socialist Revolutionaries was determined to hold on to power, and it forcibly suppressed the Constituent Assembly on 6 January 1918. The Soviet authorities were being blamed for failing to achieve economic recovery. Peasants withdrew from urban markets. Food supplies disappeared. Factory workers and miners resented the collapse in industrial production and feared mass unemployment. Local soviets resorted to grain requisitioning. Clashes with the peasantry increased. Workers listened increasingly to the Mensheviks. Bolsheviks had made the October revolution confident that their support in the working class and the peasantry would continue to rise. Their disappointment was intense in the winter of 1917-18.” (p209) But it is questionable whether this was an accurate explanation of the situation after the revolution. What had proved to be an important problem in early 1918 was the attitude towards the Constituent Assembly that had been elected by the popular vote. The Bolsheviks effectively dispersed this institution because it was considered to express the role of bourgeois democracy, but this meant that they disregarded the views of the majority of the peasants who had elected a Social Revolutionary majority within this institution. What the Bolsheviks did not seem to recognise was that it would be difficult to develop a credible form of democracy solely in terms of the exclusive role of the Soviets. Instead, it was necessary to establish a form of democratic relationship of the Soviets with the Constituent Assembly. Obviously, it was not acceptable to accept the view that the Soviets were not legitimate democratic institutions, but it was also necessary to understand that the Constituent Assembly expressed the aspirations of the peasants. Trotsky does not seem to have expressed an opinion on this issue and instead supported Lenin’s view that the Constituent Assembly be effectively dissolved in the name of the interests of Soviet democracy. This action could be understood as problematical because it resulted in the generation of the conditions for one party rule.

Another immediate problem was the issues concerning a possible treaty with the German government in order to end the involvement of Russia in the first world war. It was Lenin’s vie that such a treaty was necessary because Russia was not in a practical position to be able to conduct a war against an imperialist power, and so a treaty was necessary in order to end the threat of external military invasion and counterrevolution. However, Trotsky argued in favour of an alternative of neither war nor peace. Service outlines his views in the following manner: “Trotsky had seen the empty trenches on the eastern front and knew that Soviet Russia could fight nobody. But signing a peace with the central powers was a step too far for him. He advocated the tactic of declaring that the Soviet government would neither make war not sign a peace. He wanted to use this in his manoeuvres to delay a German offensive. In the meantime, he aimed to spread Bolshevik propaganda in Germany. Ultimately he was hoping to encourage radical socialists to undertake a socialist insurrection in Berlin.” (p211) Ultimately this issue was decided by support in the Bolshevik leadership for the approach of Lenin who was in favour of signing a treaty with the German government. But Service considers that Trotsky’s approach was ultimately impractical and was not based on a credible understanding of the aspects of the given situation. This point may have been true but the development of the process of proletarian revolution in Germany during 1918 would have meant that his approach acquired practical possibilities. Hence his approach was not inherently unfeasible but instead was problematical because of the aspects of the given international balance of class forces. Ultimately the issue of a treaty with a German imperialist government had to be decided in terms of the international political situation and developments within the class struggle. In this context it could be argued that Lenin had a more perceptive understanding of the given situation, but that in different circumstances, such as the development of revolution in Germany in 1919, then Trotsky’s approach would have become more credible and feasible. But in actuality the situation was resolved by the necessity to develop forms of struggle against the development of internal counter-revolution. In this context Trotsky had a crucially important role as leader of the Red Army. It could be argued that his important leadership helped to develop the strategy that was necessary in order to defeat the role of counterrevolution, such as the defence of Petrograd. In other words, the limitations of Trotsky were of a secondary character when compared to the actions he carried out in order to uphold the role of the revolutionary regime.

But the limitations of Trotsky were expressed in terms of internal economic policy such as his approach to the trade union issue when he called for the domination of the state over the trade unions. Service defines his standpoint in the following terms: “Trade unions defended only sections of the working class; it was the government rather than the unions which protected the class as a whole. In this situation it made sense to carry out the ‘statification’ of the labour movement. Otherwise, the unions would continue to support the grievances of the workers in conditions of economic collapse.” (p279) But what this dispute about the role of the trade unions primarily expressed was the problems involved in establishing the participation of the workers in the organisation of the economy. There was a tendency for people like Trotsky to support the dominant role of the workers state as the only effective and efficient manner in which the economy could be organised and so this meant that the aims of workers democracy had to be rejected and replaced with an economy organised by the role of the workers state. Hence Lenin was right to outline some of the bureaucratic problems of this approach, but it could be argued that Lenin still rejected the importance of the democratic involvement of the trade unions in the organisation of the economy. The Bolsheviks in collective terms had not developed a credible economic approach that could establish a genuine role for the workers in the organisation of the process of production. Instead, the outcome of these limitations was to facilitate the generation of an economy organised in bureaucratic and elitist terms. Service outlines how Lenin achieved victory over the alternative of the Workers Opposition which advocated the development of economic democracy, but he does not indicate that this meant the domination of an approach which justified the domination of the economy by the role of the party elite. In this situation Service indicates that Trotsky’s perspective for overcoming economic problems was to promote the role of state planning. He advocated increasing the importance of the Supreme Council of the Peoples Economy in terms of developing its relationship to the state planning commission. Service implies that this approach was an expression of the elitism of Trotsky, but surely the issue of the development of the efficiency of the economy implied the promotion of the effectiveness of the aspects of organisation of production. But what Trotsky seemed to be indifferent to was related to the necessity to connect this aspect to the creation of genuine democracy of the producers. Instead, he seemed to emphasise the importance of the organisation of the economy by the state. Indeed, the Bolsheviks had a general elitist rejection of the perspectives of the Workers Opposition who had argued in favour of the importance of the involvement of the trade unions in the organisation of the economy. Service mentions the objectives of the Workers Opposition, but he does not outline their importance as an expression of a possible credible alternative conception of a democratic organisation of the economy. However, both Lenin and Trotsky were united in rejecting this approach and this meant the only logical result would be the organisation of the economy in terms of the elitist role of the party and the managers of the various enterprises. In other words, the problems with the economic approach of Lenin and Trotsky meant that they could only conceive of an organisation of the economy in terms of the primary role of the party, and so the issue of economic democracy was not considered to be feasible. Hence the ultimate problem was that the Bolsheviks could only conceive of the organisation of the economy in terms that could not conceive of a practical and necessary role for economic democracy. But this meant that the party had to remain principled if this aspect was to be expressed in terms of the connection of its ascendency to the organisation of the economy which had some expression of democratic principles. However, the increasing consolidation of the domination of Stalin meant that this objective could not be realised. Instead, a bureaucratic type of economy was the expression of the increasing supremacy of a bureaucratic party elite.

However, Service outlines that the development of an effective opposition to Stalin was undermined by the aspect of a lack of unity between Trotsky and Zinoviev and Kamenev: “If the United Opposition had been created earlier, Stalin would have been helpless before it. Trotsky, Kamenev and Zinoviev would have dominated the Politburo, the Central Committee and Comintern.” (p328) Service outlines how this united opposition did not criticise the opportunist policies of the Soviet Communist party in an effective manner, but possibly the major problematical issue was the rejection of the role of the continuation of the New Economic policy. In other words, they did not have a credible economic policy and instead argued in a vague manner in favour of the necessity of increased planning and industrialisation. Thus, it was not recognised that the peasantry was the beneficiary of the economic approach and so this meant the creation of the development of popular support for the objective of the aim of socialism. What it was necessary to criticise in more intransigent terms was the increasingly support for the perspective of socialism in one country and the expression of increasing indifference about the aim of international revolution.

Service indicates that Trotsky was in favour of the continuation of planning and that this meant he understood the necessity to consolidate the economic gains of the post-revolutionary period. But Service concludes that Trotsky’s approach did not represent a principled alternative to Stalinism: “Trotsky’s specific alternatives to the policies adopted by Stalin from 1928, indeed were to share may of Stalin’s assumptions. He called for state economic planning and offered nothing that was essentially different from Soviet practices except the assurance that he would do things less violently and more democratically. These sentiments were not laden with practical specificity. Trotsky said nothing about what he would do if things did not turn out as quickly as he predicted. His thinking was premised on the achievability of success at the first attempt without the need to prepare for other outcomes. In any case he gave no clue what he would do about the kulaks….it is true that he suggested that he would have moved more slowly and peaceably than Stalin eventually did about the collectivisation of agriculture. But Trotsky never said what he would do if the peasants *en masse* refused to comply. He also promised to democratise the party. He did not explain how he would react if others engaged in factional disruption as he had caused in the 1920’s. He committed himself to engineering a global revolution. He offered no analysis of how far he was willing to risk the existence of the Soviet state. Would he gamble with the October revolution’s survival.” (p357) But this criticism is unfair because it is being suggested that the manner in which the development of economic planning can be reconciled with the interests of the peasants is by the attempt to realise this prospect in democratic terms in regards to the expression of a process of consultation in which the peasants are offered material incentives in order to support the aims of collective farming. It is also questionable whether Trotsky supported this approach as an immediate policy and instead considered this development in more longer terms. Hence whilst having criticisms of aspects of the New Economic policy because of a situation of conciliation of the kulaks he did not consider that this approach should be replaced by the collectivisation of the peasants. Instead, he emphasised the necessity to establish a more effective manner in which the economic aims of the Soviet state could be realised in terms of creating the material conditions for the increased cooperation of the peasants with these objectives. Hence his emphasis on the cooperative character of the development of collectivisation implies the importance of the role of consent. This perspective implies that there was an alternative that may have to be developed in terms of the continued connection of individual peasant farming with the role of the Soviet economy. Furthermore, Trotsky would not have repressed the role of inner party democracy in the bureaucratic manner of Stalin. His very political character was based on the acceptance of inner party democracy. In relation to the aim of world revolution this would not imply any recklessness concerning the continued importance of the Soviet state, but nor would he undermine the promotion of the international class struggle in terms of support for the nationalist perspective of socialism in one country. Instead, he upheld a perspective that would connect the aim of the strengthening of the system in the USSR with the development of the realisation of the objective of world revolution. In contrast the very opportunism of Stalinism was that it was undermining the progress of the world revolution in terms of the supposed defence of socialism in one country. He was opposing this opportunism with a principled approach, but this did not mean any undermining of the interests of the USSR.

Service interprets the character of the politics of Trotsky as an expression of an alternative form of elitism that did not differ substantially from the standpoint of Stalinism: “Would Trotsky have avoided Stalin’s methods if had won the struggle for supreme power? It is difficult to believe that he would not have reacted harshly to resistance to his policies.” (p412) This conclusion is dogmatic because Trotsky suggested the necessity of the development of inner party democracy if the possibility to discuss the role of economic and political policies was to be decided in a principled manner. This view was also connected to the importance of the role of democracy in relation to the politics of the Communist International if a principled revolutionary approach was to be adopted in connection to developing the struggle against global capitalism. In other words, an assumption of authoritarianism is not confirmed by Trotsky’s willingness to discuss with other people about politics and the development of an alternative Fourth International. In this context the problems involved with the development of the Fourth International was not the issue of Trotsky’s supposed elitism but instead the important influence of the role of the Social Democratic and Communist parties within the working class. It was the domination of these organisations which undermined the attempt to establish an alternative and popular Fourth International. Service makes no attempt to analyse the programme that was adopted by the founding congress of the Fourth International which was to be called the Transitional Programme. Only an analysis of this programme will establish the issue of the level of credibility of the Fourth International. Was this programme an expression of a naïve lack of realism or could it become the basis of the development of the influence of a new and more principled international revolutionary organisation? The programme: “The Death Agony of Capitalism” and the tasks of the Fourth International” (Pathfinder Press, New York 1973) outlines how there is an important crisis of capitalism but that the system is able to continue its dominance because of a crisis of leadership within the working class which means that it is not possible to establish the primary influence of an alternative revolutionary party. This means that the mass struggles of workers in various countries like Spain and France have not resulted in a successful process of the overthrow of capitalism. It is confidently predicted that in this situation the principled character of the Fourth International will become understood by the international working class and its programme of revolutionary change will acquire popular support and become the basis of changing society. It could be argued that this approach is immediately shown to be over-ambitious and so underestimates the difficulties involved in developing the possibility of influential popular support for the Fourth International. This criticism could be said to have some foundation, but this does not necessarily invalidate the importance of a programme for changing society. Also, it could be said that the programme has an important level of awareness of the difficulties of realising change when it suggests: “The question is one of guarding the proletariat from decay, demoralisation, and ruin.”(p116) Hence there is an important understanding that there has been an offensive of capital against labour in a situation of austerity and unemployment and so it is necessary to emphasise the situation of an adverse balance of class forces and the necessity to revive forms of militant class struggle. In other words, the complexities of the economic and political situation means that there is no possibility of an inevitable victory in the class struggle and instead what is initially required is the development of the effectiveness of the trade unions. Thus, the role of the Marxist party is concerned with developing perspectives that facilitate the possibility for the trade unions to become this type of militant organisation. The result of this development could be the creation of a situation in which the prospects of revolutionary change become established. There is the assumption that this type of programme expresses the aim of the establishment of workers management of production which then becomes the basis of the creation of a balance of class forces in which change becomes possible and the process of transition to a socialist society becomes a genuine prospect. It could be argued that this approach underestimates the difficulties involved in trying to develop a revolutionary type of consciousness within the workers and the related understanding of the importance of the aim of a worker’s government. But the point is that this perspective does not deny the importance of trying to tackle the various problems involved in relation to the issues of developing the class struggle. But the merit of the transitional programme is that it outlined a collection of demands which could promote the development of struggle against the supremacy of capital and so in that manner indicate the aspects of a strategy that could promote the possibility of changing the balance of class forces in favour of the workers and so in that manner generating the possibility of transforming the character of society. Furthermore, the transitional programme is not a perspective that cannot be modified in relation to the requirements of the economic and political situation. But what it outlines in emphatic terms is the importance of militant class struggle and the influence of the role of a revolutionary party if the transformation of capitalism into socialism is to be realised. However, it could also be suggested that the transitional programme has problems in that its emphasis on the dynamic and transforming role of class struggle can result in an underestimation of what Gramsci has defined as the issue of the ideological hegemony of capital. Hence any contemporary elaboration of the transitional programme has to address these types of issues. This means the transitional programme cannot be a definitive perspective but instead has to be continually modified in order to address the complexities and challenges of the class struggle. Nevertheless, Trotsky has written an important programme that has to be considered in relation to the development of any understanding of the process of change.

But regardless of the necessary modifications of a programme in order to make it continually relevant, Trotsky has established the strategic importance of the aim of establishing workers management of the economy if genuine social change is to occur. In this regard the problem with the social democratic strategy is that it is based on a process of adaptation to the domination of capital and so is unable to establish an effective approach with regards to the attempt to overcome the present economic system. However, a problem that Trotsky failed to tackle in the Transitional programme is the issue of the general marginalisation and lack of influence of the revolutionary party. How can a small Marxist party become an influence in relation to being able to convince the workers of the necessity of a revolutionary strategy? Trotsky does not tackle this issue and instead assumes that the principled character of the revolutionary programme will convince workers of its necessity and so become influential in relation to the tasks of the class struggle. Hence, he ignores issues of ideology and the general situation of the hegemony of the ruling class in political terms. It was Gramsci who outlined the most important understanding of the ideological tasks of the working class and revolutionary parties in terms of his concept of the necessity to oppose the hegemony of the ruling class. In this manner it would become possible to develop the prospects for revolutionary struggle. In contrast, Trotsky assumes that at a certain inevitable moment the workers would become convinced of the importance of the transitional demands that he elaborated, and so he ignored the role of the ideological aspects of the domination of capital. But this meant that his approach was dogmatic and determinist because it assumed that the workers would inevitably act in terms of trying to implement transitional demands and so this meant their mass activity would inevitably assume a revolutionary character. But the actual point was that the Trotskyists remained marginal in political terms and so few people gained knowledge about transitional demands. The result of this situation was that the ideological and political domination of Social Democracy was not challenged. Indeed, Trotskyists could only become credible in terms of becoming a left wing force within Social Democracy. This meant that the transitional programme became modified in terms of the attempt to establish influence within the major reformist parties. The significance of the transitional programme became problematical for these reasons, and instead it was often reduced to being an expression of the attempt to become an influence within reformist political organisations. Generally, there was no attempt to try and relate a transitional type of programme to the situation of a complex class struggle. In other words, the transitional method of relating demands to a possible process of intensifying the mass actions of the workers in a revolutionary manner retained its principled validity, but this type of elaboration was generally not carried out by the various Trotskyist groups. But Trotsky had established the importance of the role of demands in order to facilitate the intensification of the class struggle and so in that manner generate the possibility that mass action could result in revolutionary change. His understanding that the aim was to establish workers control of production is still important in terms of the issue of increasing the economic and political power of the working class within capitalism and so in that manner establish a possible alternative to the continued domination of capital.

The other major contribution of Trotsky to Marxism in the 1930’s was his understanding of the character of the Soviet Union. Service defines his understanding in the following terms: “The Soviet Union, despite its defects, remained a workers state. Stalin and his cronies had failed to carry out a full counter-revolution. The natural resources and the chief economic sectors were state owned. The basic ideology was Marxist. The old capitalist classes had been crushed and preference was being given to raising the cultural level of the masses. The communist party recruited heavily among the working class. The Stalinists, insofar as they managed to consolidate their power, owed their success to Russia’s ‘backwardness’. The Soviet proletariat, being a small minority of society in 1917, had lacked the education, training and experience necessary for a comprehensive ‘transition to socialism’. At the same time the capitalists had been too weak to reverse the ‘gains of October’ and the peasants were incapable of sustained resistance. The result was an unstable equilibrium which allowed the bureaucratic stratum to look after its collective interests.” (p456) This understanding is generally adequate. But it is important to understand that Trotsky considered that there were important contradictions that enable us to define the social character of the USSR. In his work: ‘Revolution Betrayed’ (New Park, London 1973) he considered that the Soviet Union was a contradictory social formation based on the expression of different and often antagonistic social and economic aspects. The potentially progressive nationalised economy was dominated by the privileged and reactionary role of the state and party bureaucracy: “Two opposite tendencies are growing up out of the depth of the Soviet regime. To the extent that, in contrast to decaying capitalism, it develops the productive forces, it is preparing the economic basis of socialism. To the extent that, for the benefit of the upper stratum, it carries to a more and more extreme expression bourgeois norms of distribution, it is preparing a capitalist restoration. This contrast between forms of property and norms of distribution cannot grow indefinitely. Either the bourgeois norm must in one form or another spread to the means of production, or the norms of distribution must be brought into correspondence with the socialist property system.” (p244) But what was not explained was how the dynamic role of an elitist form of distribution did not in an important sense also define the character of the nationalised economy. It would seem that the lack of influence of the workers within the nationalised economy meant that the system could not be defined as some type of degenerated worker’s state. Instead, it had to be understood as a new type of non-capitalist bureaucratic social formation based on the emergence of the party elite as a new form of ruling class that dominated the economy and essentially extracted a surplus from the workers in the process of production. Hence Trotsky’s emphasis on the nationalised economy for defining a type of workers state did not seem to be convincing because the workers had no effective economic power within the nationalised economy. Instead, a surplus was extracted from their production in terms of the role of a situation of subordination to the bureaucrats within the economy. However, it could still be argued that a nationalised economy was some form of progressive development because it was preferable to the domination of a capitalist system. But genuine socialism could only be realised by a revolutionary process in which the workers could establish genuine control over the economic system, and this would be related to the introduction of genuine democracy. Hence Trotsky’s call for the formation of a genuine system of democratic socialism in economic and political terms was still a principled perspective despite these apparent problems with his concept of the degenerated worker’s state.

However, Service considers that the criticisms that Trotsky had of the Stalinist regime implied that he had begun to consider the October revolution to be futile: “Did not Trotsky see the illogicality of taking pride in the October revolution whilst retrospectively pronouncing it to be futile? He had the ready response that world capitalism had been in a fragile position since the Great war. Trotsky put all his faith in international revolution. He proposed that communism could be rescued in Russia if revolutionary administrations sprouted up in the nearby countries of advanced capitalism.” (Service p463-464) But even if this perspective seems to be over-optimistic It was the only credible one that could express the possibility to regenerate the society of the USSR. Only the success of the international revolution would inspire the workers of the USSR to attempt to achieve the overthrow of the party elite and so attempt to regenerate the role of socialism within that society. It could be argued that this perspective was over-optimistic and ignored the difficulties of trying to achieve the demise of international capitalism and the role of the Stalinist elite. But there was no alternative to the approach of the development of world revolution if the party regime of the USSR was to be undermined and the possibility of a genuine socialist type of society being established. It was the very lack of the advance of world revolution which enabled the Stalinist elite of the USSR to consolidate its social power. This was the very reason why they were opposed to the progress of the international class struggle. In contrast Trotsky supported the aim of world revolution because it would facilitate the development of the political conditions to undermine the domination of Stalinism in the USSR. Indeed, it was this very perspective which indicated the principled and revolutionary character of the approach of Trotsky when compared to the opportunism of Stalinism, which was based on maintaining the USSR and so was effectively opposed to the development of international proletarian revolution. This principled difference between Trotskyism and Stalinism is not sufficiently recognised by Service who instead seems to emphasise the impractical and dogmatic character of what he defines as the politics of Trotsky. But however ambitious the politics of Trotsky there was no principled alternative to his advocacy of international proletarian revolution as the only progressive alternative to the reactionary limitations of capitalism and Stalinism.

Service considers that Trotsky’s response to the development of an ethical critique of the principles of Marxism was an expression of a dogmatic approach. He outlines how Trotsky comments that: “Civilisation can only be saved by the socialist revolution. To accomplish the overturn, the proletariat needs all its strength, all its resolution, all its audacity, passion and ruthlessness. Above all it must be completely free from the fictions of religion, ‘democracy’ and transcendental morality – the spiritual chains forged by the enemy to tame it and enslave it. Only that which prepares the complete and final overthrow of imperialist bestiality is moral and nothing else. The welfare of the revolution that is the supreme law.” (p471) But this very comment of Trotsky indicates that he is not absolutely denying the importance of morality for the development of the class struggle. Instead, he is suggesting that the very requirements of the generation of mass opposition to capitalism will create the ideology and standpoint of a different proletarian morality that can facilitate the process of generating opposition to capitalism. In this context what is being rejected is the approach of a bourgeois morality that justifies the capitalist system. Hence class struggle results in the development of solidarity and cooperation between the workers and in this manner establishes the importance of a different socialist type of morality. This aspect is of importance for creating the forms of solidarity necessary to generate the possibility of the collective actions of the workers in order to oppose the domination of capital in an effective manner. In other words, ethics does not represent a digression from the aims of creating successful class struggle and is instead an aspect of the ideology and practices of the popular attempt to realise a different and progressive type of society. Thus, it can be suggested that the creation of a socialist type of morality is an inherent aspect of the creation of effective forms of solidarity that is required in order to facilitate principled and militant forms of class struggle. It could be suggested that the various Trotskyist groups have been undermined by a pragmatism that has not recognised this importance of a socialist type of ethics in relation to the promotion of militant struggles against capitalism.

Trotsky developed a perspective of defence of the USSR in the situation of the development of the second world war and despite the treaty between the Soviet Union and Germany in 1939. But what was possibly most problematical was the fact that Trotsky seemed to develop what seemed to be a pessimistic perspective about the possibility for the realisation of international proletarian revolution. In his article: “The War and the fate of Society, Trotsky comments: “If, however, it is conceded that the present war will provoke not revolution but a decline of the proletariat, then there remains another alternative: the further decay of monopoly capitalism, its further fusion with the state and the replacement of democracy wherever it still remained by a totalitarian regime. The inability of the proletariat to take into its hands the leadership of society could actually lead under these conditions to the growth of a new exploiting class from the Bonapartist fascist bureaucracy. This would be, according to all indications, a regime of decline, signalling the eclipse of civilisation.” (Trotsky, In Defence of Marxism, Pathfinder Press 1973 p9) But in actuality there was the result of the consolidation of bourgeois democratic regimes in Western Europe and the expansion of Stalinism in Eastern Europe. The situation was not defined in the absolutist terms indicated by Trotsky. Instead, his approach was based on an underestimation of the durability of world capitalism, and the related importance of the USA. He seemed to define the dynamics of the international situation in terms of the role of fascist Germany and the USSR and so ignored the importance of the role of the various bourgeois democratic powers. The point is that the intervention of the USA in the second world war would mean that the probability would be the defeat of German imperialism and its allies. In this context the consolidation of global capitalism would occur without the necessity for the realisation of authoritarian regimes, and instead this aspect was limited to the expansion of the Soviet regime. Hence the stabilisation of capitalism was not recognised as a possibility by Trotsky and instead he could only conceive of the development of forms of authoritarianism. Hence, he did not seem to understand the actual character of economic and political power when establishing the character of his perspectives. Instead, he over-estimated the strength of the authoritarian regimes of Germany and the USSR and seemed to therefore ignore the importance of the role of bourgeois democratic powers like the USA and the UK. In actuality the role of the USA was always likely to define the outcome of the second world war and so any prediction of the development of the domination of bureaucratic authoritarianism was likely to be inaccurate. But his approach was defined by an increasingly dogmatic perspective that did not able to understand the actual balance of power between the major capitalist powers. This meant he seemed to deny the major result which was actually the consolidation of bourgeois democracy as the basis of the development of the importance of global capitalism.

It could also be argued that the revolutionary defeatism of Trotsky as applied to the second world war had its problems. In other words, there was also an issue that his perspective of revolutionary defeatism did not seem adequate to the challenges posed by the complexities of the second world war. It was necessary to develop anti-fascist struggle in the countries occupied by fascism, and the approach of Trotskyism did not seem to provide an effective perspective in this context. In other words, the imposition of the perspectives of the first world war onto the second world war did not seem to provide the basis to develop a principled and plausible strategy for the development of the struggle of the international working class. What was not sufficiently established was the priority of developing the basis of anti-fascist struggle in terms of the conditions of the second world war. In this context how was the perspective of revolutionary defeatism to be adapted to this situation? It could be argued that this approach meant the denial of support for various nations in conflict with the fascist powers. This is why some Trotskyist groups supported the bourgeois democratic regimes in opposition to fascism. Trotsky upheld the approach of revolutionary defeatism and suggested that the issue of fascist regimes did not alter the overall inter-imperialist character of the development of the second world war. Thus: “Defeatism is the class policy of the proletariat, which even during a war sees the main enemy at home, within a particular imperialist country. Patriotism, on the other hand, is a policy that locates the main enemy outside one’s own country. The idea of defeatism signifies in reality the following: conducting an irreconcilable revolutionary struggle against one’s own bourgeoisie as the main enemy, without being deterred by the fact that this struggle may result in the defeat of one’s own government; given a revolutionary movement the defeat of one’s own government is a lesser evil.” (Trotsky: ‘A Step Towards Social Patriotism’ in writings of Leon Trotsky 1938-39, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1974 p209. This perspective would seem to be satisfactory as a general understanding of what is a principled position towards the prospect of the second world war. But it would seem to be inadequate in relation to the reactionary possibility of the victory of the fascist powers and so resulting in the extension of the domination of counterrevolutionary regimes. This is why the Fourth International effectively advocated the transformation of the struggle of the bourgeois democratic powers into a genuine anti-fascist war in terms of the development of revolutionary governments which could express this possibility. But it was also necessary to propose the importance of anti-fascist struggle in order to oppose the possibility of invasion of bourgeois democratic countries by fascist powers. This would mean transforming what had been an imperialist form of conflict into a popular war of national defence. Such a development could have occurred in France between 1939-40. Instead, the French government preferred to establish a process of accommodation with the German fascist regime. In other words, the situation could not be explained in terms related to the character of the first world war, and instead there were aspects that indicated the possibility of principled anti-fascist opposition to the invasion by the fascist powers. Furthermore, the involvement of the USSR after 1941 in the development of an anti-fascist war was also an indication that it was not possible t apply an orthodox conception of revolutionary defeatism in the bourgeois democratic countries. Instead, it was necessary to call for the development of a genuine people’s war against fascism. But until this development the approach of revolutionary defeatism would still have some applicability.

It could be argued that the failure to create the Fourth International in a popular and credible manner was the ultimate failure of Trotsky’s politics. But the point is that Trotsky could not predict what would be the history of the Fourth International, and nor could he anticipate the issues that led to its various splits. Instead, we have to suggest that the founding of the Fourth International in 1938 was necessary in order to provide an alternative to the opportunist limitations of both Social Democracy and Stalinism. There was nothing inevitable about the ultimate decline of the forces that claimed to be the Fourth International and the reestablishment of its principles and programme are still something that is required in relation to the present situation. In other words, a new international is still necessary in order to create the basis of a genuine and important world party of socialism. This is the ultimate task expressed by the legacy of Trotsky.

The biography of Trotsky by Robert Service is a useful addition to the various works about Trotsky and his politics. But ultimately it is an unsympathetic approach that aims to establish the authoritarian elitism of Trotsky. He contends that Trotsky’s objectives could not be realised in the unfavourable conditions after the revolution of 1917. Thus: “His contradictions were of a sharp nature. If the conditions in Russia were as unpropitious as Trotsky later conceded, then the case for a ‘workers government’ in 1917 was demolished. The October revolution did not start to degenerate only from the mid 1920’s. It was flawed from its inception when the Bolsheviks used force against protesting labourers and closed down any soviets without Bolshevik majorities. Trotsky had campaigned before 1917 for the ‘proletariat’ to liberate itself and make its own revolution. As soon as he had power, he eagerly suppressed popular aspirations by violence. He was a ruthless centraliser and a friend of army and police. Nor were his ideas as original as his admirers have claimed. The idea of proletarian government had been coined by…. Parvus…. Even Trotsky’s interpretation of the USSR in the 1920’s owed much to the Mensheviks. His insistence in the last decade of his life that ‘Soviet power’ had not utterly discredited itself justifiably offended many of his intelligent followers in his lifetime.” (p499) However, it could be suggested that the bureaucratic limitations of Trotsky were generally the result of the problems involved in trying to establish a revolutionary government in adverse circumstances. He aimed to develop a genuine soviet administration that aspired to advance the realisation of the aim of international revolution. Furthermore, his struggle against Stalin indicated that his ultimate political approach was based on opposition to the consolidation of a regime of bureaucratic party power. He wanted to establish a genuine system of Soviet democracy with the party as advisor to this system rather than being an expression of bureaucratic privilege. Ultimately his opposition to Stalinism indicated the approach of revolutionary politics despite aspects of elitism in his politics. His role in rejecting Stalinism was an expression of the ultimate progressive aspects of Bolshevism as the expression of genuine Marxism. Hence, he was ultimately vindicated in these terms. Thus, the claim of Service that Trotsky ultimately upheld an authoritarian theory and practice is a one-sided view that ignores the importance of the problems of the post-revolutionary period that led to the development of a one-party regime as the expression of Soviet democracy. The point is that there was a situation of polarisation after 1917 which meant that authoritarian developments became likely. Trotsky did to some extent justify this situation, but he ultimately indicated his support for democracy in terms of a principled opposition to the consolidation of the domination of Stalinism. His call for the revival of the role of the Soviets would have meant the regeneration of multi-party democracy and the necessity for the Bolsheviks to attempt to establish genuine popular support for its regime. Therefore, Service is being dogmatic when he considers that Trotsky was essentially an authoritarian. Certainly, it could be suggested that there were elitist aspects to the politics of Trotsky, but it could also be suggested that his struggle against Stalinism could only be successful in terms of the revival of a form of genuine democratic politics. Ultimately it was his principled opposition to Stalinism which indicated that he upheld a form of authentic Marxism and so can be vindicated as an expression of the attempt to uphold Bolshevism against its degeneration by the development of Stalinism. This does not mean that there are no problems with the politics of Trotsky, but it also indicates that his affinity with internationalist principles and the objectives of Marxist theory that he represented a progressive alternative to the bureaucratic system of Stalin.

Ultimately the major problem was that the very aims of Marxism became associated with Stalinism and so it seemed that revolutionary politics had become defined by the interests of a bureaucratic elite. Trotsky tried to provide an alternative to this development, but it was the very marginalisation of his politics which meant that the objective of emancipation became associated with the restoration of capitalism rather than the establishment of a principled socialist government. This was the result of the limitations of Stalinism and was to the enduring credit of Trotsky and Trotskyism that it tried to uphold the importance and credibility of a revolutionary alternative to Stalinism. The apparent failure to develop the influence of a genuine Marxism in terms of the role of Trotskyism became an important aspect in the development of the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Ironically Trotskyism was vindicated by these developments because it had always suggested that socialism could not be advanced by the bureaucratic elitism of Stalinism. Hence what seems to be a failure of Trotskyism is actually its vindication because it always understood that socialism could not thrive and develop under a regime based on the bureaucratic elitism of Stalinism. In other words, Trotskyism was vindicated by the very demise of the USSR and the other Stalinist regimes. The bureaucratic and authoritarian character of these types of society could not express the aims of Marxism. This was the very point made by Trotsky and which still indicates the relevance of his politics. Hence this is why the limitations of Trotsky’s politics do not undermine the continuing validity of his politics contrary to the effective conclusion of Service.